

Economic questions: the Viktor Frankl Question

Published: March 30, 2026, 7:19 am

This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of [political economy](#) might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The [origin of this series is noted here](#).

This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.

Why have I included [Viktor Frankl](#) in this series? I have done so because he asks a question that economics almost never confronts, which is what gives human life meaning?

In [Man's Search for Meaning](#), Frankl argued that people are not primarily motivated by wealth, pleasure, or consumption but by the search for purpose. That insight does, of course, expose a profound weakness in much modern economics, which assumes that human well-being can largely be understood through income, utility, and material consumption. Frankl's work suggests that this assumption is fundamentally mistaken: people can endure extreme hardship if they believe their lives have meaning, while material comfort alone does not prevent despair.

This matters for economics because it changes the question the discipline should be asking. If meaning, purpose, and contribution are central to human flourishing, then the goal of an economy cannot simply be growth or rising consumption. Instead, economic systems should be judged by whether they create the conditions in which people can live purposeful lives, whether through meaningful work, care for others, participation in society, or delivering security about the future.

Frankl, therefore, belongs in an economic questions series because he reminds us that the real issue is not how much an economy produces, but whether it helps people live lives that matter.

[Viktor Frankl](#) was not an economist. He was a psychiatrist, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, and the founder of logotherapy, which is a form of psychology centred on the search for meaning. His most famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, is often read as a personal testimony. It is that. But it is also something more: a theory of what sustains human beings under extreme conditions, and what destroys them even in comfort.

Frankl's claim is stark: people can endure almost any hardship if they can find meaning within it, but they may collapse even in materially adequate conditions if life becomes purposeless. Meaning is not a luxury. It is a requirement. It is the psychological foundation of resilience, moral agency, and hope.

Once this is understood, economics can no longer pretend that well-being is reducible to income, consumption, or growth. The political economy of any society must be judged by whether it enables its members to live lives that feel worthwhile.

Hence, the ***Viktor Frankl Question: If human beings cannot live without meaning, why do we tolerate an economic system that so often deprives people of purpose, dignity, and the chance to matter?***

Meaning is not optional

Frankl argued that the deepest human motivation is not pleasure (as Freud assumed) or power (as Adler assumed), but meaning. People seek reasons to live, reasons to endure, and reasons to act morally, even when doing so carries a cost.

This undermines the consumerist assumption that happiness is simply maximised utility. Humans do not flourish because they have more things. They flourish when they experience connection, responsibility, creativity, love, and contribution.

An economics that models humans as consumption machines misunderstands what humans are.

The economic violence of meaninglessness

Frankl's work draws attention to a form of harm economics rarely recognises: the harm of meaninglessness. When people feel useless, discarded, or irrelevant, they suffer, not metaphorically, but psychologically, physically, and socially.

Modern economic structures often create this condition deliberately by:

*

creating work that is monotonous and alienating,

- *
delivering precarious labour that denies dignity,

- *
treating unemployment as a personal failure,

- *
stripping communities of industry and purpose,

- *
designing social security systems that are intended to humiliate,

- *
framing education as employability rather than development.

This is not just bad policy. It is about a systematic production of despair.

Dignity as the foundation of meaning

Frankl insisted that meaning is bound up with dignity. People need to feel they matter. They need to feel their lives have value beyond market price.

The tragedy of modern political economy is that it often prices people like commodities. It defines worth through wages. Those paid the least are treated as the least valuable. Those without work are treated as disposable. This is not merely unjust. It is psychologically corrosive. It attacks the very basis of meaning.

Frankl would have recognised this as a civilisational failure: a system that denies dignity undermines the will to live fully.

Freedom and responsibility

Frankl famously argued that even under extreme constraint, humans retain the freedom to choose their attitude and moral response. This is not a sentimental claim; it is a statement about agency. But for Frankl, freedom is inseparable from responsibility. Meaning is often found not by indulging desire, but by taking responsibility for something beyond oneself, whether it be a task, a person, or a cause.

This has direct economic implications. A society that treats people as individual competitors encourages narcissism, anxiety and isolation. A society that structures life around shared responsibility makes meaning possible.

Economics rarely models responsibility. Yet it may be the most important human

variable of all.

Suffering and the politics of interpretation

Frankl never romanticised suffering. He did not argue that pain is good. He argued that suffering becomes unbearable when it is meaningless, when it feels pointless, imposed, and humiliating.

This matters because modern societies impose suffering routinely by imposing:

- * poverty,
- * austerity,
- * insecurity,
- * homelessness,
- * hunger, and
- * degrading labour.

They then compound that suffering by framing it as deserved or inevitable.

Frankl would insist this is moral violence: the imposition of hardship without meaning, without dignity, and without a shared commitment to repair.

What answering the Viktor Frankl Question would require

A Frankl-inspired political economy would not treat meaning as a matter of private psychology. It would treat meaning as a social obligation. At a minimum, it would require:

- * Creating work with dignity and purpose based upon the contribution a person makes, skills, autonomy and the delivery of social value, and not just profit extraction.

*

The creation of economic security because people cannot search for meaning while trapped in fear and insecurity, which is what the current economic system is designed to deliver.

*

An end to humiliation as policy. Social security systems, unemployment support, and care systems should be designed to uphold dignity and not punish recipients.

*

Community renewal through rebuilding places abandoned by market logic, restoring

belonging and collective identity in the process.

*

Recognition that the value of labour is not solely represented by wages, requiring that caregiving, volunteering, creative labour, and civic contribution should all be seen as forms of creating meaning and well-being.

*

The creation of a politics of care that sees society as a moral project, and not simply as a market arena.

These changes would not make society softer. They would make it survivable.

Inference

The Viktor Frankl Question forces us to confront the emptiness at the heart of modern economic ideology:

- * Growth does not guarantee meaning.
- * Consumption does not create purpose.
- * Markets do not supply dignity.

Many of the greatest harms of contemporary political economy come not only from poverty, but from the feeling of being unnecessary and of having a life without recognised value.

Frankl teaches that the survival of a civilisation depends on more than material provision. It depends on whether people can live lives they find worth living.

To answer his question is to accept a simple truth that economics has forgotten, which is that an economy that cannot give people dignity and meaning cannot sustain itself.