

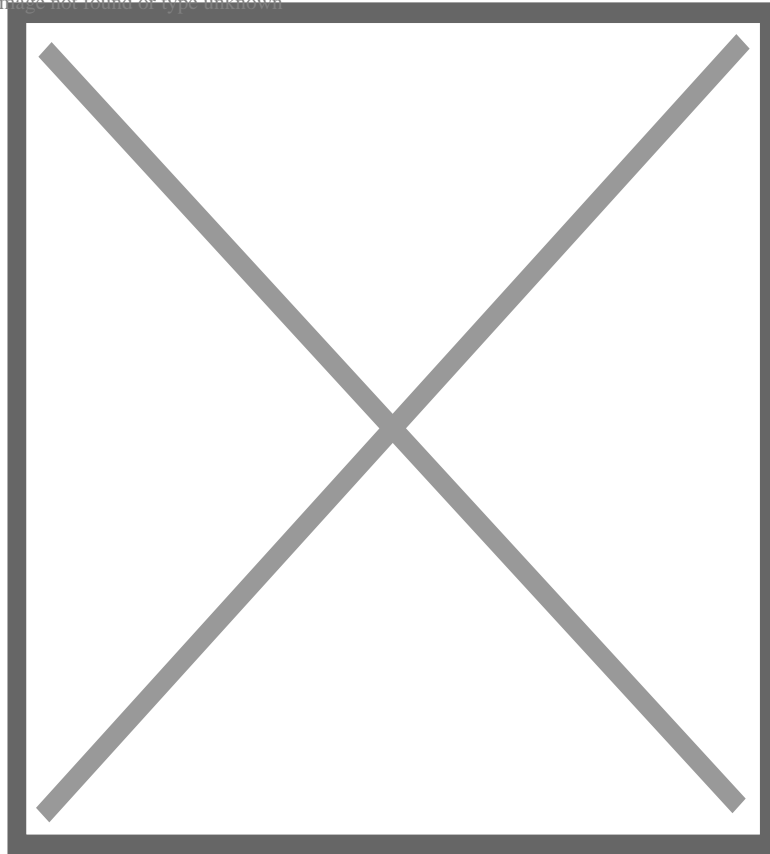
The New Criterion

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Emily Smith on Viktor Frankl, Happiness and Meaning

by Neilson MacKay

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In a new article in the *Atlantic*, *The New Criterion's* Emily Esfahani Smith wonders if there is more to life than happiness. Writing about a new study that examines the difference between a happy life and a meaningful life, she argues that the meaningful life--even if it leads to low happiness, as it often does--is better than the merely happy life.

In September 1942, Viktor Frankl, a prominent Jewish psychiatrist and neurologist in Vienna, was arrested and transported to a Nazi concentration camp with his wife and parents. Three years later, when his camp was liberated, most of his family, including his pregnant wife, had perished -- but he, prisoner number 119104, had lived. In his bestselling 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which he wrote in nine days about his experiences in the camps, Frankl concluded that the difference between those who had lived and those who had died came down to one thing: Meaning, an insight he came to early in life. When he was a high school student, one of his science teachers declared to the class, "Life is nothing more than a combustion process, a process of oxidation." Frankl jumped out of his chair and responded, "Sir, if this is so, then what can be the meaning of life?"

As he saw in the camps, those who found meaning even in the most horrendous circumstances were far more resilient to suffering than those who did not. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing," Frankl wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Frankl worked as a therapist in the camps, and in his book, he gives the example of two suicidal inmates he encountered there. Like many others in the camps, these two men were hopeless and thought that there was nothing more to expect from life, nothing to live for. "In both cases," Frankl writes, "it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them." For one man, it was his young child, who was then living in a foreign country. For the

other, a scientist, it was a series of books that he needed to finish....

According to Gallup , the happiness levels of Americans are at a four-year high -- as is, it seems, the number of best-selling books with the word "happiness" in their titles. At this writing, Gallup also reports that nearly 60 percent all Americans today feel happy without a lot of stress or worry. On the other hand, according to the Center for Disease Control, about 4 out of 10 Americans have not discovered a satisfying life purpose. Forty percent either do not think their lives have a clear sense of purpose or are neutral about whether their lives have purpose. Nearly a quarter of Americans feel neutral or do not have a strong sense of what makes their lives meaningful. Research has shown that having purpose and meaning in life increases overall well-being and life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, enhances

resiliency, enhances self-esteem, and decreases the chances of depression. On top of that, the single-minded pursuit of happiness is ironically leaving people less happy, according to recent research. "It is the very pursuit of happiness," Frankl knew, "that thwarts happiness."

This is why some researchers are cautioning against the pursuit of mere happiness. In a new study, which will be published this year in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, psychological scientists asked nearly 400 Americans aged 18 to 78 whether they thought their lives were meaningful and/or happy. Examining their self-reported attitudes toward meaning, happiness, and many other variables -- like stress levels, spending patterns, and having children -- over a month-long period, the researchers found that a meaningful life and happy life overlap in certain ways, but are

ultimately very different. Leading a happy life, the psychologists found, is associated with being a "taker" while leading a meaningful life corresponds with being a "giver."

Read the full piece [here](#).

Neilson MacKay is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Durham and a Visiting Fellow at Harvard.