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A Will to Meaning

By **CASIMIR ZABLOTSKI**
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

It may be argued that no event has indelibly marked modern history as much as the tragedy of the Holocaust. As historians struggle to preserve the concentration camps where these atrocities were carried out, the experiences of those who survived have been forever recorded in art, literature, music, and popular culture. With these permanent reminders of what was perpetrated behind the drawn curtain of the Nazi regime, it is necessary to commit oneself to their study; for, as George Santayana famously wrote, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

One cannot be blamed for falling into a melancholy when absorbed in any work related to the Holocaust. Along with the grievous disregard for human life in the Stalinist regime and other communist states, the Holocaust represents one of the worst losses of human life in modern history. Literature on the subject ranges from the harrowing *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, to the graphic novel *Maus* and countless other works of fiction and nonfiction.

It is true that there is plenty of bad in the world and in existence . . . Yet it is also evident that there is still plenty of good in the world today . . .

Viktor Frankl, the eminent psychiatrist, wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* soon after he was liberated from a concentration camp. Throughout the work, which initially details his experiences at concentration camps that were not as visible as the infamous Auschwitz, Frankl illustrates both how horrendous the experience of the Holocaust was and his search for meaning in the suffering omnipresent in the camps. His conclusion, which is as powerful as it is provocative, is that humans, because of the powers of their deliberative minds, ultimately exist in order to find and extrapolate a meaning in their lives. This understanding is rooted in a form of existentialism, which does not despair of existence but rather searches for a feeling of validity in life.

This principle is opposed to earlier modern understandings of why humans exist. Sigmund Freud, with his belief that humans were perpetually propelled by insatiable primal instincts, maintained that they had a "will to pleasure," in which achieving pleasure and avoiding pain is paramount. This, coupled with Freud's understanding of the life and death drives, renders existence an inevitably and almost unintentionally hedonistic experience. Friedrich Nietzsche, and the psychologist Alfred Adler, argued instead for a "will to power." In this concept, which is somewhat ambiguous, humans strive to exercise their power over other humans. In contrast to these two principles, Frankl proposed a third concept that goes beyond the principles of Freud and Nietzsche: a "will to meaning."

Deeply rooted in his experiences surviving the Holocaust, Frankl's will to meaning seeks to make the best of any negative experience by focusing on the good that may yet come. He connects this idea to the Greek word "logos," which he understands as meaning reason. Everyone has some form of meaning in their lives, Frankl contends. Even during the Holocaust, he was motivated to survive by the desire to publish a manuscript he had lost to the Nazis, and many others endured simply with the hope of seeing their loved ones again. Developing his sentiments into a coherent system of thought, Frankl then proposes "logotherapy," psychiatric therapy

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A Special Kind of Political Scientist

By **DR. DAVID FRISK**
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

There's a reason why political science departments include political philosophy, and Willmoore Kendall (1909-1967) is a good example of it. His work began with "theory," then went on to examine how the American system functioned. The Founding and the Constitution held a special interest for Kendall as a way of fully understanding politics in his lifetime. And he certainly didn't leave political philosophy behind.

Nor did he leave questioning behind—a very much learned, relentless questioning. A sustained opposition to intellectual hypocrisy and complacency was among this remarkable political scientist's main qualities. It has been aptly noted that Kendall had "no time for sentimentality, woolly thinking, or self-serving ideas." Going along to get along, suppressing major concerns in the interest of careerism or friendship, were simply foreign to him.

Willmoore Kendall remains a compelling figure. There is a special timeliness in his personal story . . . and his dynamic thought.

And so, it seems, were intellectual closure and finality. "Perhaps Kendall's greatest virtue," one scholar has suggested, "is that he constantly argued with himself; more than once in his mature years, he had the humility to 'start over,' changing his intellectual position in response to some challenge to his habits of thought."

Kendall was also a profoundly

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that strives to help individuals identify some form of meaning in their lives.

Logotherapy holds that there is meaning in existence even in the worst possible situations, like the Holocaust, and that even if humans cannot find sufficient meaning in a given place or time, they are still usually capable of altering their conditions, or at least their perceptions. This is a powerful idea, even in situations that are quite removed from Frankl's context, the Holocaust. At a time when college students feel increasingly lonely and isolated, the idea that there is meaning in their existence may very well be comforting.

It is true that there is plenty of bad in the world and in existence, as exemplified by the Holocaust and many of the serious issues we face as a nation and society. Yet it is also evident that there is still plenty of good in the world today – the smell of petrichor, the satisfaction of academic recognition, and the gentle caress of a loved one. There will always be positivity, and there will always be negativity. One cannot successfully block out the bad in the world without also precluding oneself from the good. Thus, one must accept that there is both good and bad in existence in order to live a full life. This delicate balance may be best achieved by finding a meaning in life, and with this meaning in hand, life will be fruitful and enjoyable.

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political man who aimed to make his fellow American conservatives more effective. He hoped for the conservative movement's success despite some differences with it, especially on the size and scope of government. Kendall thought seriously about how he might help to clarify leading principles for conservatives—in part because he thought the right's other leading intellectuals were mostly "false teachers" and a "poor lot."

Favorable in his early years toward a radically democratic majoritarianism and in some respects a radical leftist, Kendall after World War II grew increasingly conservative . . .

Along with his sophisticated learning in political philosophy and his in-depth study of our country's constitutional traditions, Kendall felt a strong identification with Middle America. He would, I think, have understood both the current crisis in our polarized polity and the right's current base quite well.

While Kendall's intellectual life had an indomitable integrity, his life in general, as the historian of American conservatism George Nash has remarked, was one of "restless eccentricity." Yet despite his combativeness, his drinking problem, and his tendency to spend too much time writing letters and the like (it isn't hard to imagine him on social media), what Kendall did publish was excellent.

He did not produce a major work of his own, except for his highly original and much-respected doctoral dissertation on Locke. But more directly relevant to American politics were such articles as "The People Versus Socrates Revisited," "The Two Majorities" (presidential and congressional), "The Social Contract: The Ultimate Issue Between Liberalism and Conservatism," and "Conservatism and the 'Open Society.' " They all, and others, could have been the basis for entire books. In reading these essays, you sense that the issue has been rigorously analyzed *and* brought to a fresh conclusion or restatement. Kendall's prose was elaborately constructed yet unpretentious, clear, often colloquial.

Favorable in his early years toward a radically democratic majoritarianism and in some respects a radical leftist, Kendall after World War II grew increasingly conservative and in particular more committed to the Constitution's checks and balances, to its implicit requirements for geographically dispersed and durable—not nationwide and short-term—majorities in order to enact major public policy. He also preferred congressional, as against either presidential or judicial, power.

Another major theme was public virtue and citizenship. Rejecting the behavioralism that he feared was already predominant among political scientists in his Yale department and elsewhere, Kendall similarly came to reject the widely held view that the American founders envisioned self-seeking, mutually frustrating clashes between factions or interest groups as the essence of politics. He argued that the Founding was more communitarian, envisioning (imagine!) "a virtuous people" rather than a merely pluralistic and self-interested one.

Also central to Kendall's work was his belief in something called "public orthodoxy." As he wrote: "by no means are all questions open questions; some questions involve matters so basic … that the society would, in declaring them open, abolish itself, commit suicide … " He warned that a nation's total ideological openness to the extent advocated in, for example, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* would make politics descend "into ever-deepening *differences* of opinion, into progressive breakdown of those common premises upon which alone a society can conduct its affairs by discussion, and so into the abandonment of the discussion process and [thus] the arbitrament of public questions by violence and civil war."

Willmoore Kendall remains a compelling figure. There is a special timeliness in his personal story (one reason I'm writing a biography of him) and his dynamic thought.

Dr. Frisk is a Resident Fellow at the Alexander Hamilton Institute.

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CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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#AWillToMeaning

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