International Journal of Research on Multidisciplinary Studies
Online ISSN: 3116-4137 | Print ISSN: 3116-4145
Volume 1, Issue 10, pp. 408-417, November 2026
https://ijroms.com
Original Article

Suffering, Freedom, And Meaning: A Philosophical Dialogue between Saint Paul and Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy

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Article History:

Date Received: October 8, 2026
Date Revised: October 16, 2026
Date Accepted: November 4, 2026
Date Published: November 13, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.67903/ijroms0564

Document ID: *2026IJROMS0564*

Recommended Citation:
Yambot, R. A. P. (2026). Suffering, Freedom, And Meaning: A Philosophical Dialogue between Saint Paul and Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy. International Journal of Research on Multidisciplinary Studies, 1(10), 408-417. https://doi.org/10.67903/ijroms0564

Abstract. Saint Paul's undisputed letters portray a life marked by imprisonment, persecution, bodily weakness, pastoral anguish, and persistent vulnerability. These experiences raise a philosophical question that exceeds either biography or clinical description: what forms of freedom and meaning remain when suffering cannot simply be removed? This paper employs comparative philosophical hermeneutics and conceptual analysis to place Pauline suffering in critical dialogue with Viktor Frankl's logotherapy. Frankl is first reconstructed on his own terms through the will to meaning, responsible freedom, attitudinal values, and self-transcendence; Paul is then used to test the adequacy and limits of those categories. The analysis identifies a qualified freedom of response under constraint but argues that Pauline agency cannot be reduced to interior attitude. It is vocational, communal, relational, and sustained through realities the subject understands as received rather than self-generated. On this basis, the paper proposes a fourfold model of practical, attitudinal, relational, and receptive agency. Receptive agency names the capacity to receive sustaining meaning, vocation, grace, or promise; interpret that reception; and respond through personally attributable action. The comparison therefore neither turns Paul into a proto-logotherapist nor treats Frankl as a merely individualistic thinker. Instead, Frankl illuminates meaningful response under constraint, while Paul radicalizes the relational and receptive dimensions of agency. The paper also maintains an ethical limit: suffering is not intrinsically meaningful, avoidable suffering should be resisted or alleviated, and diminished agency must never become grounds for blaming sufferers.

Keywords: Freedom; Logotherapy; Saint Paul; Suffering; Viktor Frankl

Introduction

Suffering is a universal possibility in human existence, but its occurrence does not settle what suffering means. Pain, loss, persecution, illness, and confinement can diminish a person's range of action and can threaten the coherence through which life is ordinarily understood. For this reason, the philosophical problem of suffering is inseparable from questions of freedom and meaning: if persons do not control many of the conditions under which they suffer, in what sense can they remain agents, and how can meaning remain possible when circumstances resist change?

Recent scholarship helps clarify what is at stake in calling an experience "suffering." Tate (2026) understands suffering through an evaluative gap between how things are and how they ought to be, thereby stressing that suffering is not reducible to pain as sensation. Stump's (2010) philosophical treatment of suffering likewise resists thin explanatory models by showing how questions of suffering implicate agency, relation, narrative, and the good of persons. These approaches support the present study's refusal either to equate suffering with pain alone or to assume that suffering is intrinsically meaningful.

Saint Paul offers a particularly substantial historical case for this problem. In the undisputed Pauline letters, he speaks of beatings, imprisonment, hunger, danger, bodily weakness, anxiety for communities, and the burdens of apostolic life (2 Cor 11:23–28; Gal 6:17; Phil 1:12–14). These texts are theological, but also existential: they record a subject interpreting vulnerability, responsibility, failure, hope, and vocation from within conditions he did not fully control. Pauline scholarship has long recognized that Paul's thought is inseparable from the concrete hardships of his mission and the social world in which that mission unfolded (Dunn, 1998; Meeks, 2003; Murphy-O'Connor, 1996).

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https://ijroms.com
Original Article

Nearly two millennia later, Viktor E. Frankl developed logotherapy, a meaning-centered form of existentialist analysis grounded in a philosophical anthropology of freedom, responsibility, and self-transcendence. Frankl argues that human beings are oriented toward meaning and that, when unavoidable suffering cannot be removed, a person may still retain a limited but morally significant capacity to take a stance toward it (Frankl, 1967, 2011). His position does not claim that suffering is good in itself. Rather, it asks whether a human being can respond to unavoidable suffering in a way that preserves responsibility and orientation toward meaning.

The apparent affinity between Paul and Frankl is philosophically suggestive, but simple comparison is not enough. To say merely that Paul endured suffering and Frankl wrote about meaning in suffering risks lowering the study to a list of similarities. It also invites anachronism by imposing twentieth-century therapeutic categories upon a first-century religious figure. A stronger inquiry must therefore ask both what Frankl makes visible in Paul and where Pauline thought resists or exceeds the explanatory reach of Frankl's framework.

Recent interdisciplinary work makes the need for a sharper comparison more urgent. Yoon (2026) places 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 in dialogue with third-wave psychotherapies and shows that Pauline weakness can be engaged productively with contemporary therapeutic categories. However, the present study asks a different question. Its concern is not whether Pauline language can be translated into a therapeutic mechanism, but what conception of agency becomes visible when Paul is read through Frankl and, conversely, where Pauline vocation, grace, community, and eschatological hope test the explanatory sufficiency of a Franklian account of meaningful response. The contribution is therefore a comparative philosophical account of agency under constraint rather than a therapeutic appropriation of Paul.

This paper argues that reading Paul through Frankl reveals a qualified but significant freedom of responsible response: suffering may radically restrict external agency and reshape the field of experienced possibilities without necessarily exhausting every form of agency. Frankl is indispensable to this argument because his account is already responsibility-centered and self-transcendent; he does not reduce freedom to arbitrary inward choice. Paul nevertheless specifies and radicalizes these structures by locating meaningful response within vocation, communal obligation, grace, participation in Christ, and eschatological promise. I therefore propose a layered account of agency—practical, attitudinal, relational, and receptive—in which Franklian attitudinal freedom is one important form of agency rather than the whole grammar of freedom. The specifically Pauline contribution is not the discovery that persons can endure suffering, but the claim that meaningful agency can remain genuinely personal even when it is relationally constituted and sustained by sources the agent does not regard as self-generated.

Research Questions

This study studies the relationship among suffering, freedom, and meaning through a philosophical dialogue between Saint Paul's writings and Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, focusing on how meaningful human agency remains possible under conditions of suffering and constraint.

Specifically, the study intends to address the following questions:

1. How does Viktor Frankl's logotherapy explain the relationship among suffering, freedom, and meaning, particularly in situations of unavoidable suffering?
2. How do Saint Paul's undisputed letters portray human agency, responsibility, and meaning amid suffering and personal limitations?
3. What are the points of convergence and divergence between Frankl's logotherapy and Pauline thought regarding freedom, responsibility, self-transcendence, vocation, and communal relationships?
4. What conceptual insights emerge from the dialogue between Frankl and Paul that support the formulation of a fourfold framework of human agency comprising practical, attitudinal, relational, and receptive dimensions?

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study remains limited in scope. It does not make a historical claim about influence between Paul and Frankl, offer a comprehensive exegesis of the Pauline corpus, empirically test agency under suffering, or adjudicate the truth of Paul's metaphysical and eschatological convictions. Its claims are comparative and philosophical: they concern the conceptual structures disclosed by selected undisputed Pauline texts when placed in dialogue with Frankl. The proposed fourfold model, especially receptive agency, should therefore be treated as an interpretive framework open to further testing in philosophical anthropology, theology, trauma studies, and empirical research rather than as a complete theory of human agency.

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Literature Review

Logotherapy, Meaning, and Responsible Freedom

Logotherapy stresses the human capacity to discover meaning and assume responsibility even under difficult and unavoidable circumstances. Frankl (1967, 1985) explains that although individuals may not always control their circumstances, they can still choose their response. This perspective demonstrates the relationship between freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning. Frankl (2011, 2014) further develops the view that meaning is a fundamental dimension of human existence, while Guttmann (2008) and Pytell (2015) provide additional discussions of meaning-centered living and the philosophical foundations of Frankl's thought. Contemporary applications also demonstrate the relevance of logotherapy in vocational settings, particularly in decision-making, adaptation, and healthcare interventions (Chanouha et al., 2026; Hong & Kang, 2026). These works lay a foundation for understanding how meaningful human response endures despite limitations and suffering.

Pauline Theology, Suffering, Vocation, and Communal Responsibility

Pauline theology presents suffering within a broader outline of faith, responsibility, vocation, and communal relationships. Dunn (1998) and Wright (2013) provide extensive discussions of Paul's theological thought, while Murphy-O'Connor (1996) situates his writings within their historical setting. Meeks (2003), Furnish (1998), and Gaventa (2007) further explore the communal dimensions of Pauline Christianity, particularly in relation to Christian identity, relationships, and responsibilities. Hays (1989) studies the influence of Israel's Scriptures on Paul's writings, while Horsley (1997) considers Paul's relationship to the Roman Empire's political context. Martin et al. (2017) provide further theological and textual discussion of 2 Corinthians, including its treatment of weakness and suffering. More recent work also examines suffering through theological perspectives informed by Pauline themes (Delport, 2026). Collectively, these studies provide a basis for examining how Paul's theological and communal framework understands suffering, responsibility, and meaningful existence.

Philosophy and Nature of Suffering

Suffering is a complex human experience that raises philosophical questions concerning vulnerability, meaning, adversity, and the value of human existence. Stump (2010) examines suffering in relation to human vulnerability, divine purposes, and the problem of evil. Tate (2026) explores the conceptual nature of suffering, including the relationship between subjective experience and objective conditions. Similarly, Peltomäki (2026) examines meaningfulness in relation to death and suffering, while Jayawickreme (2026) questions whether adversity necessarily produces value or positive transformation. Morán Roa (2026) further considers suffering in relation to human agency, experience, and worldhood. These perspectives emphasize that suffering should not automatically be interpreted as beneficial or transformative. Rather, they provide a philosophical foundation for examining how individuals may pursue meaning while accepting the realities and limitations imposed by suffering.

Agency, Relational Autonomy, and Human Vulnerability

Human agency involves the capacity to make decisions and respond to circumstances, but social relationships, dependence, and vulnerability also shape it. Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) challenge individualistic understandings of autonomy by stressing the social and relational conditions that affect human agency. Similarly, Mackenzie et al. (2014) examine vulnerability as a key dimension of human existence, showing how dependence and limitations affect individual experiences and choices. These perspectives suggest that agency should not be understood solely as independent action or unrestricted freedom. Instead, human freedom operates within relationships and circumstances that may either confine or support meaningful responses. This literature provides a conceptual foundation for examining the relational dimension of agency alongside Frankl's emphasis on personal responsibility as well as the communal dimensions of Pauline thought.

Contemporary Theological and Meaning-Centered Applications

Contemporary studies show the continuing relevance of meaning, faith, and responsibility in responding to suffering. Gutierrez and Gozum (2026) examine the meaning of Christian prayer among Filipino Catholics experiencing pain, illness, and suffering, highlighting the significance of religious practice in lived experiences of suffering. Wu (2026) explores Paul's mystical experience through Maurice Blondel's philosophy, adding to discussions of revelation, vocation, and transcendent meaning. In professional contexts, Chanouha et al. (2026) and Hong and Kang (2026) illustrate contemporary applications of logotherapy in decision-making, adaptation, and healthcare. These studies provide additional perspectives

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on how meaning-centered and theological approaches remain relevant in contemporary experiences of suffering. However, they serve primarily as contextual and applied literature instead of direct evidence for the comparative interpretation of Frankl's writings and Paul's undisputed letters.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses comparative philosophical hermeneutics and conceptual analysis to examine the relationship among suffering, freedom, and meaning in Viktor Frankl's logotherapy and selected Pauline writings. The comparison is deliberately analogical rather than genetic: it does not seek to demonstrate that Paul historically anticipated logotherapy, nor does it reduce Pauline theology to modern psychology. Frankl's concepts serve as a retrospective philosophical lens to understand selected existential structures in Paul's descriptions of suffering, while the historical and theological differences between the two thinkers remain explicit. The analysis is also two-directional: Frankl's categories illuminate the Pauline texts, and the Pauline material is used to assess where those categories remain useful, require qualification, or reach their explanatory limits.

Research Locale

The study is limited to a comparative philosophical interpretation of selected Franklian concepts and passages from the generally undisputed Pauline letters. It is not a historical-influence study, a comprehensive exegesis of the Pauline corpus, an empirical investigation, or a demonstration of the truth of Pauline theological claims.

Research Participants

The Pauline side of the comparison uses selected passages from the generally undisputed letters—Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

Research Instrument

The analysis draws on Frankl's primary philosophical texts, particularly Man's Search for Meaning, The Will to Meaning, "Logotherapy and Existentialism," and The Unheard Cry for Meaning (Frankl, 1967, 1985, 2011, 2014). These works help reconstruct four central concepts: the will to meaning; freedom and responsibility; attitudinal values amid unavoidable suffering; and self-transcendence. Secondary scholarship clarifies Frankl's philosophical anthropology and the interpretation of logotherapy (Guttmann, 2008; Pytell, 2015). Historical and exegetical scholarship situates these passages in their literary and doctrinal contexts (Dunn, 1998; Furnish, 1998; Hays, 1989; Martin et al., 2017; Meeks, 2003; Murphy-O'Connor, 1996; Wright, 2013). Contemporary psychological and clinical studies contextualize and support the practical relevance of meaning-centered approaches; they do not prove philosophical or theological claims.

Data Gathering Procedure

Pauline passages were selected because they explicitly address suffering, weakness, confinement, responsibility for others, perseverance, or eschatological hope. Among the principal Pauline passages examined are 2 Corinthians 11:23–28 and 12:7–10, which address persecution, bodily weakness, and the sufficiency of grace; Philippians 1:12–26, which presents suffering in relation to vocation and the advancement of the gospel; Romans 8:18–39, which situates present suffering within the horizon of hope as well as future fulfillment; and Galatians 6:2–5, which highlights communal responsibility and personal accountability. These passages were selected for their direct relevance to the study's central concepts, not to provide an exhaustive interpretation of the Pauline corpus. The study considers how these texts describe human agency under constraint and how vocation, communal obligation, and hope shape meaningful response. Interpretation is guided by close conceptual and contextual reading rather than by an attempt to supply a comprehensive biblical commentary. Frankl's concepts are likewise reconstructed from the primary works before being applied comparatively, so that logotherapy is not reduced to a theory of private interior attitude. Throughout, the analysis preserves the distinction between logotherapy's philosophical language and Paul's theological language. The comparative examination proceeds in four stages. First, the study reconstructs Frankl's central claims about meaning, freedom, responsibility, and self-transcendence. Second, it identifies the existential structures of suffering in the selected Pauline texts, focusing on constraint, weakness, vocation, communal responsibility, and hope. Third, it examines points of convergence between the two accounts, especially freedom within constraint, responsibility, future orientation, and self-transcendence. Fourth, it tests the limits of the comparison by asking whether Frankl's conceptual framework can adequately describe Pauline emphases on grace, vocation, communal responsibility,

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https://ijroms.com
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participation in Christ, and eschatological fulfillment. The purpose is not to declare one thinker superior, but to clarify what each makes philosophically visible about meaningful agency under suffering. This procedure supports the paper's proposed layered account of agency—practical, attitudinal, relational, and receptive—while treating that model as a philosophical proposal to be assessed through conceptual clarity, textual adequacy, and argumentative coherence. Because the comparison is analogical, similarities between Paul and Frankl do not establish historical influence, conceptual identity, or worldview equivalence. The use of contemporary psychological and clinical literature is contextual rather than evidentiary for the paper's central philosophical claims. The analysis also recognizes that suffering can severely restrict practical agency and that a person's capacity to respond may be diminished by trauma, coercion, illness, deprivation, or social abandonment. It therefore does not treat suffering as intrinsically good or imply that people should passively accept avoidable suffering. The proposed fourfold account of agency is a conceptual framework, not an empirically validated model or a substitute for appropriate clinical, social, or pastoral care.

Results and Discussions

Research Question 1: How does Viktor Frankl's logotherapy explain the relationship among suffering, freedom, and meaning, particularly in situations of unavoidable suffering?

The discussion is organized around the four research questions. It first examines Frankl's account of suffering, freedom, and meaning, then considers the portrayal of agency and responsibility in Paul's undisputed letters. It then identifies the convergence and divergence between the two perspectives, notably regarding self-transcendence, vocation, and communal responsibility. Finally, it synthesizes these insights into the proposed fourfold framework of practical, attitudinal, relational, and receptive agency.

Suffering Restricts Freedom without Necessarily Determining Meaning

Frankl helps make visible a distinction already implicit in Paul's letters: external constraint and experiential determination are not identical. Paul cannot control imprisonment, bodily vulnerability, public rejection, or many of the dangers of his mission. Nevertheless, these conditions do not wholly settle the significance of his life. He continues to interpret, promise, exhort, write, care, and orient himself toward a task that reaches beyond the immediate circumstances.

The resulting conception of freedom is neither absolute autonomy nor mere resignation. It is better described as responsive freedom: a limited but morally significant capacity to position oneself responsibly within conditions one did not choose. This reading avoids the exaggerated claim that inner freedom is untouched by trauma or coercion. Rather, it affirms that limiting action does not always eliminate agency.

Meaning as the Mediation between Constraint and Response

The comparison also clarifies meaning's mediating role. Suffering is not meaningful simply because it occurs, and freedom is not meaningful merely because a choice remains possible. Meaning appears when a person's response integrates into a larger orientation of responsibility, value, relationship, or purpose. In Frankl, this takes the form of discovering what life or the situation asks of the person. In Paul, it takes the form of interpreting suffering within vocation, service, participation in Christ, and hope.

Meaning therefore does not erase suffering. It alters the sufferer's relation to the condition by preventing pain from becoming the sole interpretive horizon of existence. This point bridges Paul and Frankl: both reject the assumption that adverse circumstances ultimately define the person.

Research Question 2: How do Saint Paul's undisputed letters portray human agency, responsibility, and meaning amid suffering and personal limitations?

From Attitudinal Freedom to Vocation: Pauline Specification of Responsibility

The first major tension concerns not whether Frankl recognizes responsibility beyond the self—he clearly does—but how that responsibility is specified. Frankl's attitudinal values address the remaining freedom of response when unavoidable suffering cannot be changed, and his wider account of self-transcendence directs the person toward tasks, values, and persons beyond the self. Paul therefore should not be contrasted with a caricature of Frankl as a theorist of private interior mastery. The difference emerges instead in the source and grammar of obligation. Paul's central question is not only how he will regard suffering, but to what and to whom he must remain faithful within it.

Pauline vocation thus specifies and radicalizes Franklian responsibility. Paul understands his mission as a claim that precedes immediate suffering and binds him to communities and to Christ. Meaning is not simply the discovery that some response remains possible; it is fidelity to a received task whose

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Volume 1, Issue 10, pp. 408-417, November 2026
https://ijroms.com
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authority the subject does not regard as self-conferred. The philosophical implication is that responsible freedom may be answerable to claims that are neither arbitrary products of the will nor reducible to external coercion. Agency here takes the form of personally owned response to a vocation experienced as given.

Research Question 3: What are the points of convergence and divergence between Frankl's logotherapy and Pauline thought regarding freedom, responsibility, self-transcendence, vocation, and communal relationships?

From Self-Transcendence to Ecclesial and Communal Responsibility

A second tension concerns the density of relationality. Frankl's idea of self-transcendence already resists individualism because meaning is found through persons, tasks, and values beyond the self. Paul intensifies this structure by locating suffering within a durable network of ecclesial responsibility. His anxiety for the churches, his maternal imagery, and his account of consolation shared through affliction make suffering part of an interpersonal field in which the meaning of one person's endurance is inseparable from obligations to others (Gaventa, 2007; Hays, 1989). The difference is therefore not individual versus relational, but relatively open self-transcendence versus a specifically communal form of answerability.

Contemporary work helps illustrate why this distinction matters without collapsing Pauline theology into psychology. In their integrative thematic analysis of Christian prayer among Filipino Catholics facing pain, illness, and suffering, Gutierrez and Gozum (2026) identify hope, endurance, relational trust, and communal support as recurring dimensions of meaning. These data do not verify Paul's theological claims. Still, they reinforce the philosophical plausibility of treating endurance as socially and relationally constituted rather than as a private achievement of mental control.

Paul therefore challenges any reading of existential resilience that treats the isolated individual as the primary unit of analysis. He exercises his freedom through bonds of obligation and solidarity. The Pauline subject remains an agent not despite relation but through forms of answerability that organize what counts as a meaningful response. This point prepares the way for receptive agency, because the relations that sustain Paul are not simply resources he chooses to use but constitutive claims and gifts to which he responds.

Research Question 4: What conceptual insights emerge from the dialogue between Frankl and Paul that support the formulation of a fourfold framework of human agency comprising practical, attitudinal, relational, and receptive dimensions?

From Responsible Freedom to Receptive Agency

A third tension concerns the relation between dependence and agency. Modern accounts of agency can be tempted to treat self-sufficiency, control, or independence as its paradigm, yet both relational-autonomy theory and philosophical work on vulnerability show that dependence and agency are not simple opposites (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000; Mackenzie et al., 2014). Paul's language of weakness makes this tension explicit. In his own interpretation, the capacity to continue does not arise solely from an untouched interior power; it is sustained through grace, vocation, communities, and relation to Christ.

This does not eliminate agency; it reconfigures it. I propose the term receptive agency for the capacity to receive a sustaining good, claim, meaning, vocation, grace, or promise that the subject does not regard as self-generated and nevertheless to appropriate and answer it through personally attributable action. Receptive agency differs from passivity because reception must be interpreted, endorsed, embodied, and enacted; it differs from simple attitudinal agency because it puts emphasis not only the position one takes but also the source from which the agent understands the possibility and norm of response to arise. The category therefore names agency that is genuinely the person's without requiring that all enabling conditions originate with the person.

Four conditions clarify the concept. First, receptivity presupposes a real limit to self-sufficiency: something necessary for meaningful action is received rather than manufactured. Second, reception remains agential only when the subject actively interprets or appropriates what is received. Third, the resulting response must remain attributable to the person rather than functioning as mere external compulsion. Fourth, reception does not erase vulnerability; a person may remain dependent, wounded, or constrained while still responding. These conditions distinguish receptive agency from passivity on one side and heroic voluntarism on the other.

From Meaning-Making to Meaning-Reception

The language of "meaning-making" must therefore be used carefully. Frankl himself does not teach that meaning is arbitrarily manufactured by the subject; meaning is discovered within concrete responsibilities and possibilities. Paul radicalizes this non-arbitrary dimension by locating significance

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International Journal of Research on Multidisciplinary Studies
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Volume 1, Issue 10, pp. 408-417, November 2026
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within a prior horizon of Christ, vocation, community, and divine promise. The contrast is thus not between Franklian invention and Pauline reception, but between two accounts of discovered meaning whose ultimate horizons are differently specified.

For this reason, Pauline suffering invites a distinction between meaning-making and meaning-reception. Meaning-reception does not mean that interpretation disappears. The agent still discerns, judges, appropriates, and acts. What changes is the claimed source of significance: the subject understands the meaning to which he responds as antecedent to his own construction of it. Meaning-reception is therefore an interpretive achievement, not a doctrine of self-creation.

Wu's (2026) Blondelian reading of Paul's mystical experience offers a useful conceptual analog for this claim because it stresses transformation through revelation rather than through a merely self-generated conversion. Since the present study restricts its primary Pauline evidence to the undisputed letters, Wu is used conceptually rather than as historical evidence for the Damascus narratives. The relevant philosophical point is that reception can initiate rather than negate agency: an antecedent claim may reorient the subject while still requiring a personal response for which the subject remains responsible.

Future Orientation and the Distinctiveness of Pauline Hope

Frankl and Paul both show that present suffering can be interpreted in relation to a future that gives the present a different significance. However, their accounts should not be collapsed. Frankl's future orientation may involve unfinished work, a person to love, a responsibility to fulfill, or a meaning still to be realized. Paul's hope is specifically eschatological: the anticipated future is grounded in resurrection and divine fulfillment.

Pauline hope is therefore not simply a psychological projection technique. It is a metaphysical and theological claim about reality. From a philosophical standpoint, this marks a limit of logotherapy as an interpretive lens: logotherapy can illuminate the existential function of future orientation, but it cannot adjudicate the truth of Paul's eschatological convictions. The comparison must preserve this boundary.

Pauline scholarship helps clarify what this difference entails. Wright (2013) situates Paul's understanding of suffering within the larger horizon of resurrection and the renewal of creation, while Delport (2026), engaging Romans 8, points out the tragic tension of inhabiting a present identified by agony while oriented toward apocalyptic fulfillment. These perspectives sharpen the asymmetry with Frankl: Pauline futurity does not simply supply an individual with a motivating future task; it places present affliction within a claimed transformation of persons, communities, and creation itself. Logotherapy can illuminate the existential function of such future orientation, but it cannot by itself supply or adjudicate the metaphysical warrant for the eschatological horizon on which Pauline hope depends.

The Ethical Limit: Meaningful Suffering Is Not Good Suffering

Any philosophy of meaning in suffering faces an ethical danger: the claim that suffering can become meaningful may be misheard as the claim that suffering ought to be sought, tolerated, or imposed. Neither conclusion follows from the present analysis. The relevant category is unavoidable suffering. When suffering can be prevented or alleviated, moral responsibility ordinarily requires action to heal, protect, ensure justice, or secure liberation. Tate's (2026) account is useful here because it treats suffering as a real evaluative rupture between actual conditions and how they ought to be, leaving conceptual space to morally criticize the conditions that produce suffering.

This ethical caution is reinforced by philosophical work that refuses to treat suffering as automatically ennobling. Stump (2010) treats suffering as a problem that implicates persons' good rather than as a value acquired simply by occurrence. Peltomäki (2026) approaches suffering and death through human finitude, while Jayawickreme (2026) directly challenges the cultural assumption that adversity inevitably produces growth. Together these perspectives support an important distinction: suffering may become a context in which meaning is discovered or received, but the possibility of meaning neither makes suffering intrinsically good nor guarantees resilience or growth.

This distinction also clarifies why a Christological interpretation of suffering need not legitimate passivity. The Pauline account developed here ties meaning to responsibility, consolation, care for communities, and hope rather than to suffering itself. Accordingly, the claim that suffering can be interpreted within a Christological horizon cannot warrant preventable harm. A theology of meaning that stopped opposing avoidable suffering would contradict the relational responsibility the Pauline account itself makes central.

Paul’s endurance under persecution and Frankl’s account of attitudinal values should therefore not be used to blame sufferers for despair, trauma, or diminished agency. Nor should the survival of some persons in extreme circumstances be interpreted as evidence that those who did not survive lacked meaning or moral strength. The philosophical claim is narrower: under some conditions of unavoidable suffering,

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meaningful response remains possible. Possibility is not obligation, and existential resilience is not a measure by which victims should be morally judged.

Philosophical Implications

The dialogue between Paul and Frankl yields a more differentiated account of the relationship among suffering, freedom, and meaning. First, suffering discloses the limits of practical freedom: persons do not choose many of the conditions that shape their lives, and severe suffering can diminish both available action and the experienced field of meaningful possibilities. Second, freedom may nevertheless survive in qualified forms of response. Agency is not identical with control. Third, meaning mediates the relation between constraint and response by locating action within a larger horizon of purpose, value, relationship, vocation, or hope. The comparison therefore replaces a binary question—whether the sufferer is free or unfree—with a layered question about which forms of agency remain available, impaired, relationally sustained, or received.

The analysis endorses a fourfold rather than binary model of agency. Practical agency concerns the actions materially available to a person. Attitudinal agency concerns the capacity to adopt or revise a stance toward what cannot presently be changed. Relational agency concerns the capacity to answer persons, communities, practices, and commitments that make claims upon the self. Receptive agency concerns the capacity to receive sustaining meaning, vocation, grace, support, or promise and to appropriate that reception through responsible action. A further qualification is necessary: not every received claim or demand is agency-supporting. Receptivity must remain distinguishable from coercion, manipulation, and the unquestioning acceptance of harmful obligations. A received vocation or meaning can sustain agency only insofar as the subject retains some capacity for discernment, interpretation, and responsible appropriation. This qualification also recognizes that such capacities may be diminished under conditions of trauma, dependency, or severe constraint. Receptive agency therefore does not require unquestioning acceptance, nor does it make every form of dependence ethically legitimate. Frankl's analysis of constrained freedom illuminates the first two dimensions especially well; the latter two become especially pronounced in Paul, although Frankl's self-transcendence already anticipates an important part of the relational structure.

These four forms are analytically distinct but not sequential stages. They can vary independently and can support or impair one another. A person may retain practical choices while losing an intelligible horizon of meaning; another may have very little practical freedom while remaining strongly relationally answerable to others. Receptive agency may sustain attitudinal or relational agency. Still, it may also be difficult or impossible when trauma, coercion, illness, or social abandonment severely constricts the person's capacity to receive and interpret what is offered. The model therefore describes differentiated possibilities of agency, not a moral expectation that sufferers must always find meaning.

Paul's distinctive contribution is therefore not a simple rejection of Franklian freedom. Frankl already interprets freedom through responsibility and self-transcendence. Paul shifts the emphasis by making agency vocational. It answers a call, ecclesial because communities organize responsibility, receptive because strength is understood as received rather than self-generated, and eschatological because its final horizon is the promised transformation of reality. The Pauline material thereby expands the conceptual vocabulary needed to describe agency whose dependence is constitutive rather than merely accidental.

The resulting philosophical anthropology challenges the opposition between freedom and dependence. Relational-autonomy theory already shows that social embeddedness need not negate agency (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000), while philosophical work on vulnerability emphasizes that dependency and susceptibility to harm are basic features of embodied human life rather than exceptional failures of autonomy (Mackenzie et al., 2014). The Pauline material adds a distinctively receptive dimension: dependence can exist alongside responsible action when what is received does not bypass the subject but becomes something the subject interprets, owns, and answers. This insight extends the dialogue beyond logotherapy to wider philosophical questions about relational autonomy, vulnerability, finitude, and the sources that sustain agency.

Paul therefore does more than add specifically Christian content to an otherwise complete Franklian account, but neither does he refute Frankl. The relation is better described as conceptual expansion. Frankl provides a powerful account of responsibility, attitudinal freedom, and self-transcendence under constraint. Paul relocates those insights within a thicker grammar of vocation, community, grace, and promise. Freedom moves from being understood primarily as a residual capacity for duty-bound attitude toward a broader pattern of answerability in which relations and goods may sustain action the subject does not regard as self-originating. Franklian attitudinal freedom thus remains one indispensable layer within a wider anthropology of dependent and relational agency.

The comparison further sharpens the concept of dignity. Dignity cannot depend solely on success, control, bodily strength, social recognition, or freedom from dependence, because each can be diminished or lost. Nevertheless, dignity should not rest on heroic endurance either. A more adequate account recognizes the sufferer as a person whose capacities for action, interpretation, relationship, and reception may be

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International Journal of Research on Multidisciplinary Studies
Online ISSN: 3116-4137 | Print ISSN: 3116-4145
Volume 1, Issue 10, pp. 408-417, November 2026
https://ijroms.com
Original Article

impaired in different ways. In contrast, their claim to others' solidarity remains. Vulnerability therefore generates responsibilities not only for sufferers but also for communities: the diminution of another person's agency calls for care, protection, and justice rather than judgment (Mackenzie et al., 2014).

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on published philosophical texts and secondary literature. It does not involve human participants, human-subject data collection, or intervention; therefore, institutional review board review was not required, subject to applicable institutional policies. Ethical considerations guided the selection, interpretation, and citation of sources. References to suffering and sensitive populations are discussed with sensitivity and respect for human dignity, avoiding stigmatizing language and unsupported generalizations.

Conclusion

Interpreting Pauline suffering through Frankl's logotherapy reveals a philosophically significant relation among suffering, freedom, and meaning. Suffering can radically restrict practical action and reshape the sufferer's field of possibilities without necessarily possessing total authority over the meaning of a person's existence. Frankl clarifies why responsible response, future orientation, and self-transcendence may remain when circumstances cannot be changed immediately. His account is therefore not simply a theory of inner attitude but a responsibility-centered anthropology of meaning under constraint. Paul, however, cannot be reduced to an illustration of Frankl. The Pauline material specifies and expands meaningful agency by locating response within vocation, communal responsibility, grace, participation in Christ, and eschatological hope. On this basis, the paper has proposed a fourfold distinction among practical, attitudinal, relational, and receptive agency. Receptive agency matters because it shows how an action can remain genuinely the person's even when the agent understands its sustaining source as received rather than self-produced. On this account, dependence is not automatically the negation of agency. The philosophical contribution exists in this asymmetrical dialogue. Frankl illuminates meaning and responsibility within suffering; Paul tests the limits of treating freedom principally as a remaining capacity for stance by foregrounding answerability, community, receptivity, and eschatological hope. Meaning does not make suffering good, erase trauma, or entail growth through adversity. Under some conditions, however, it can prevent suffering from becoming the person's final measure. Read together, Paul and Frankl support an account of freedom realistic about finitude and vulnerability yet open to responsibility, solidarity, hope, and agency sustained beyond the isolated self.

Recommendations

The fourfold agency framework developed in this study offers several possible applications for scholars, counselors, and theologians. These recommendations are intended as conceptual and interpretive guidelines rather than empirically validated interventions. For future philosophical research. Future studies may use the framework to examine how practical, attitudinal, relational, and receptive agency operate in different accounts of human freedom, responsibility, suffering, and meaning. Researchers should preserve the conceptual differences between Frankl's logotherapy and Pauline theology rather than treating them as identical or assuming a direct historical influence. Further studies may also explore the framework's relevance to other philosophical and theological traditions. For counselors and helping professionals. The framework may serve as a reflective guide for considering different dimensions of a person's agency. Practical agency focuses on available choices and meaningful actions; attitudinal agency concerns one's response to circumstances that cannot readily be changed; relational agency stresses the importance of interpersonal support and responsibility; and receptive agency calls for reflection on meaning, grace, and realities that cannot be fully controlled. Consider these dimensions in ways that respect each client's circumstances, autonomy, beliefs, and personal boundaries. The framework should complement, not replace, evidence-based counseling methods and appropriate professional assessment. For theologians and pastoral ministers. The framework may support reflection on the relationship between human responsibility, suffering, community, and receptivity to grace. It may also guide further examination of Pauline texts concerning communal belonging, perseverance, and dependence on divine grace. At the same time, Frankl's work can contribute insights concerning meaning and the freedom to respond to difficult circumstances. Pastoral applications should avoid implying that suffering is always necessary, that individuals are responsible for the suffering imposed on them, or that faith alone removes the need for practical assistance and professional care. Overall, the fourfold agency framework may encourage a more in-depth understanding of human responses to suffering by considering action, attitude, relationships, and receptivity together. Its application should remain sensitive to individual circumstances and the distinct philosophical and theological

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commitments that inform these understandings. Further conceptual development and empirical investigation would be necessary before the framework could be treated as a validated practical intervention.

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