

## Correspondence

# Unamuno on suffering and Frankl's 'will to meaning': a philo-logotherapeutic advice to humankind here and beyond and the role of social relations towards mental fitness

### ABSTRACT

Humankind is both historically and existentially exposed to various traumatic and disastrous experiences including the COVID-19 pandemic. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno argued that part of humans' consciousness is the awareness of death and suffering. He argued that the latter is an essential feature of existence. Whereas Viktor Frankl's logotherapy stresses that humans' primary motivational force is to find meaning in life particularly in the midst of suffering. This paper attempts to enrich Unamuno and Frankl's contentions on persons' nature to suffer and discover meaning. Through this construction, the author believes it could help individuals to properly embrace and adapt to the inevitable sufferings of the world and bolsters mental health like in the current pandemic.

**Keywords** COVID-19, logotherapy, suffering

COVID-19 is arguably one of the most dreadful and tragic experiences of humanity since the evolutionary period of human ancestors. The pandemic's mortalities reach, as of June of 2021, nearly four million deaths.<sup>1</sup> Part of the existence and persistence of the contemporary health crisis is the attempt of academic researchers and social commentators to extrapolate the possible meanings and messages that the COVID-19 can offer to individuals.<sup>2</sup> In locating such academic search for meaning, the Philippines' community pantries have been characterized as a reflection of solidarity among Filipinos.<sup>3</sup> Further, some claim that COVID-19 pandemic tests theists' spiritual well-being,<sup>4</sup> offers reconnection among family members, and assesses countries' governmental management and leadership. In a recent paper of the journal, the author emphasized the importance of embracing the reality of suffering towards a full adaptation to the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Any pain and struggle must be directed in acknowledging the temporal and sentient existence of humans. Consequently, the author of this correspondence investigated the relevance of Unamuno's philosophical position about suffering and Frankl's logotherapy for the promotion of strong mental health.

Based on his classic book *The Tragic Sense of Life*, philosopher Miguel de Unamuno claims that all consciousness is the personal awareness of one's death and subjection to inevitable sufferings.<sup>6</sup> He summarized this as follows: 'suf-

fering is the substance of life and the root of personality, for it is only suffering that makes us persons.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, since mortality (or existential limitation) and sufferings are what constitutes consciousness then everyone must embrace such reality, otherwise, people will be denying the suffering as a defining feature of existence. From the evolutionary description, humans undoubtedly underwent perilous conditions.<sup>8</sup> It can be deduced indeed that we are evolutionarily bounded with sufferings that arguably challenged our human ancestors' survival. Yet even in the face of modern society and despite the numerous innovative scientific achievements especially in medical sciences, humans remain physically and mentally susceptible to pain or suffering.

Likewise, curiosity and the desire to search for some purposes have been a companion and major qualities of humankind. According to Viktor Frankl, the primary proponent of logotherapy, individuals have a 'will to meaning.'<sup>9</sup> In Frankl's language, meaning refers to a sense of life's goals and the ability to make sense of different life circumstances. He accentuated that people must be able to make sense of different human circumstances, especially about suffering. Generally, logotherapy is grounded on the following three basic principles: 1) life has meaning under all circumstances either in the state of happiness or misery; 2) the driving force to live is one's will to discover meaning in life; and 3) humans

have the freedom to discover and find meaning in anything they do or in deciding difficult situations.<sup>10</sup> Frankl also coined ‘existential frustration’ to be a negative consequence when the will to meaning is hindered and a person starts to wonder about the worthwhileness of life.<sup>7</sup> Hence, health functioning lies in one’s satisfaction and the ability to find meaning and reasons behind life conditions.

In times of pandemic, sufferings (e.g. psychophysical struggles) are deeply existential issues that challenge most people’s effort to finding meaning.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, literature regarded it as a great enemy of people’s psychological state as emotions may sometimes overthrow one’s rational thinking.<sup>12</sup> However, the failure to acknowledge sufferings (as part of human existence) heightens the problem in overcoming them. It is in this case that the author advances the notion that the ‘will to know’ must start in the recognition and knowing the reality of sufferings which could signal the diminution or even elimination of any anxiety and fear about the future and the possible coming of untimely death. Nonetheless, the denial of suffering can account for why some are still astounded when a disastrous event like the COVID-19 happens. Rather than protesting against suffering, humans have to recognize its presence. Only through this one can be fully prepared in facing other unknown kinds of pain and sorrows in life. Moreover, notwithstanding the degree of difficulty and intensity of pain brought by human miseries, searching its meaning and purpose acts as a counteractive response. Despite the emptiness of an intrinsic meaning of sufferings (e.g. global pandemic), a person can still discover its significance on how it shapes one’s personal and social life by means of self-reflection—the mediating factor in determining the value of suffering. Hence, Frankl’s ‘will to meaning’ invites activeness and that suffering is not an exclusive negative concept.

Nevertheless, people with inadequate cognitive and emotional maturity endure an arduous position in confronting suffering. Here social relations (e.g. parent-child; religious leaders-believers; teacher-students) play critical roles in helping individuals to completely fathom the nature of suffering and its worth. Also, embracing the normality of pain, in Unamuno’s eye, individuals become capable of loving others. We can both love and suffer at the same time. Happiness lies in our individual freedom to discover purpose and meaning while we personally and collectively stumble in great challenges. Conclusively, choosing to seek meaning after the acceptance of suffering to our lives entails genuine yet self-empowering lifetime and resilient mental health towards problems and issues instead of a mere consolation.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the editors of the journal for reviewing the paper for possible publication.

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doi: 10.1093/pubmed/fdab270