

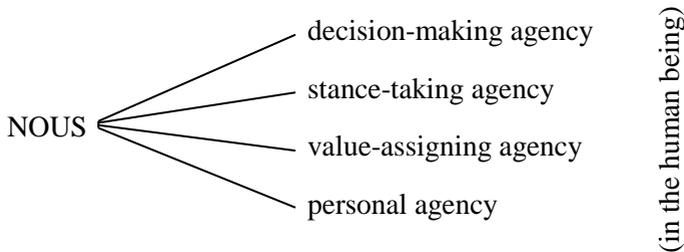
Being Able to Decide Well

Ten theses and a practical example

Nous and logos

Logotherapy takes the motto: “know thyself” even further; it says, “decide about thyself!” Thus logotherapy deals with the human power of decision. On what pillars does this power of decision rest? Firstly on the *nous*, the human spirit. Only spirit has the power of will and is capable of making decisions; what is not spiritual has no power of will and is incapable of making decisions. The power of decision also rests on another pillar, however: the fact that there exists something for which one can decide for or against. Without this, no decision would be possible, because a genuine decision is above all an “intentional act” (Frankl), which presupposes something that is intended. Love is only possible when there is something to love. One can only say yes to something when there is something to say yes to. Thus, *nous* presupposes *logos*, and engages with logos. The power of decision and the understanding of meaning belong together.

Because the words “spirit” and “meaning” are used in all sorts of ways in everyday speech, we will define them again as they are used in logotherapy so as to avoid any misunderstandings. According to the logotherapeutic concept, the spiritual represents the decision-making, the stance-taking, the value-assigning and the personal agency in human beings.



All four characteristics are “specifically human”, in other words they are not characteristics of other life forms, and as far as we know they belong only to humans. For only humans take a stance with respect to everything in them and around them, and this stance is of a personal nature. Only humans assign values to what they find around them. Only humans possess a knowledge of good and evil. They have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and have been expelled forever from the paradise which is beyond good and evil. In logotherapy, the spiritual or noetic human dimension is the specifically human dimension that sets the human being on the path of being human.

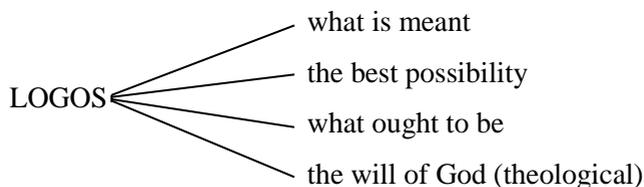
Nevertheless, it would be wrong to equate the spiritual dimension of the human being with human intelligence. Animals also have intelligence to a certain extent. Even computers are intelligent! Intelligence includes, for example, the considerable intelligent power that is needed to calculate the trajectory of a missile so that it lands in the middle of a densely populated enemy city. The onboard computer of a modern missile can do this in minutes. But the onboard computer of even the most advanced missile will never think about whether it is justifiable or meaningful to detonate an atomic bomb over a densely populated region. And this is because, despite its intelligence, it does not possess a spiritual dimension.

Spiritual, however, is also not the same as religious. Of course human religious belief is grounded in human spirituality, which is why animals do not pray to God. Religious belief is a decision for God, and only a being able to distinguish between good and evil can decide for “goodness in person”. Nevertheless, the human spiritual dimension encompasses more than religious phenomena; love is also grounded in it, as is enthusiasm, interest, artistic ambition, the urge for discovery, the search for truth and the will for creative change. The human spirit reaches beyond itself into the world.

At its best, the spiritual may be defined as “movement”, not movement in space, but movement in being. The philosopher Mi-

chael Rappenglück once compared the spiritual with a dance. A dance is what is played out between the dancers, and the spiritual is what is played out between a human being and the world. Dancers may become ill, but the dance cannot. It can fail because of the illness of some of the dancers, or even despite the fact that all the dancers are healthy, if the movements are in the wrong direction. It is the same with the human spirit. It cannot become ill, but its mobility can be hindered and restricted by physical illness. It can also go astray despite physical health, and it can achieve great things in spite of physical illness. Matter, and with it the human organism, has to do with health and illness, birth and death; spirit, on the other hand, has to do with what is right and wrong, meaningful and not meaningful.

Let us turn to the definition of meaning, of the *logos*. Meaning is what is meant⁷⁶, the best possibility, what ought to be, or theologically expressed, the will of God.



This definition implies that the meaning concept in logotherapy is oriented towards something that transcends subjectivity, something that is independent of human caprice. Humans cannot decide arbitrarily what is meaningful, they can only *discover* it, and they can do so because meaning exists in the world. There are three general rules to note:

⁷⁶ See Viktor E. Frankl, *The will to meaning*, New American Library, New York 1970.

1. The search for meaning does not generate meaning

At a seminar in Rome I explained this rule to my students in the following way: I said that they could go out into the street and look for cats. Their search for cats would not generate cats, but their search would be successful because there are in fact cats in the streets of Rome. Similarly, meaning in life is there in reality, and it can be searched for, discovered, and found, but it cannot be generated or thought up. It is there in the same way that reality itself is; we do not just imagine it.

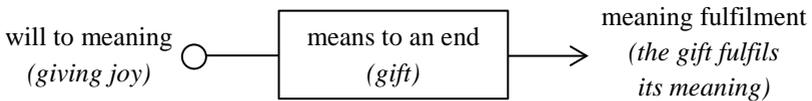
2. Meaning is not a way to satisfy drives

When I ask my students why Viktor E. Frankl talked about a *will to meaning* and not about a “meaning drive” that causes humans to search for meaning in their lives, they usually have to think for a while before they come up with the right answer. So I will give away the answer for the sake of the reader. If fulfilling meaning was the same as satisfying a drive, the end effect would be about the self and its satisfaction, and not about the meaning to be fulfilled. If one does something in order to satisfy a drive, one does it with the goal of getting rid of the unpleasant pressure of the drive. One feels better when the pressure of the drive is removed. If one eats something because one is hungry, one does not it so that the food may be eaten, but to get rid of the hunger. If there were another way of getting rid of the hunger, one might choose that instead and ignore the food. The end goal of any drive is the satisfaction of that drive.



This is not the case with meaning fulfilment. Meaning fulfilment is about something whose actualisation is recognised as meaningful and important. This thing is and remains the end goal of all efforts to actualise it. If one makes an effort to do so, it is not to feel better afterwards and somehow release inner pressure, but simply to see that it is done. One does it for the meaning that one sees in it, and not for any other reason. Admittedly one makes use of things as means to the end of fulfilling meaning, but meaning fulfilment itself can never be a means to an end; if the goal is not pursued for its own sake, it is not fulfilling meaning.

Let us look at a comparison from the field of psychology which is characteristic as regards the evaluation of motives. Numerous papers have been written about what gifts “mean”. For example, it is said that someone who makes a gift of jewellery is hoping for a lasting friendship with the recipient, or that someone who makes a gift of something unusual is trying to get attention from the recipient. Depth psychological interpretations like this are rooted in the drive concept, because they assume that gifts are ultimately means to the end of drive satisfaction. One gives gifts to make one’s desires known and to bring about their satisfaction. The question of whether a particular gift is meaningful for a particular person, whether that person can make good use of it and take joy in it, does not arise at the level of drives, it only appears at the higher level of meaning fulfilment. Here the ultimate goal is the person who receives the present, and for whom the present should be suitable, nothing else. The recipient’s joy in the gift they have been given is meaning enough.



With this example we can make the logotherapeutic definition of the meaning concept more flexible. Meaning is what is meant – in the example it is what is meant by the act of giving: an expression of love and friendship. Meaning is the best possibility – in the example it is the best possible thing that can come from the gift: the deepening of the friendship. Meaning is what should be – in the example this is what the effect of the gift should be on the recipient: joy. Meaning is the will of God – in the example this is the blessing bestowed by a lovingly-chosen gift.

3. The most powerful trigger for psychic illness is to experience or enact something contrary to meaning

It is repeatedly pointed out in the logotherapeutic literature that, contrary to popular opinion, it is not overload and over-exertion that are the main triggers of illness, but the absence of meaning fulfilment and experience of meaning. The bad decisions of others which cause one to suffer, and one's own bad decisions, weigh more heavily on the psyche than continual work and times of scarce enjoyment. When the *will to meaning* is frustrated, people are shaken to their core; the *nous* that is no longer aware of the *logos* rears up in anguished despair. The search for meaning and the discovery of meaning are thus fundamental elements of preventative healthcare, and central topics for any therapeutic intervention, as we have described in detail elsewhere. However, the *nous* that is aware of the *logos*, and is thus successful in its search for meaning, but does not decide for it – the “spirit that always negates” like Mephistopheles, represents human misery at its height and greatest need for redemption, which leads to the concept of responsibility.

Humans and reality

To define the concept of responsibility in general, we could say: Responsibility is always being requested from us by a possibility for actualising meaning or value. Only where people have a free choice of possibilities are they responsible for what they choose, and in particular for whether they choose something valuable or valueless from the possibilities that are open to them. We are not responsible for the possibilities that exist; they are constantly changing in life anyway and not under our control. We are responsible for the choice that we make from amongst the possibilities that we encounter, because our choice causes some possibilities to disappear without being actualised, and others to become realities. We are responsible for allowing the less valuable possibilities to disappear and preserving the more valuable possibilities by bringing them into reality, where they are safely protected.

While there are always valuable possibilities in principle, meaningful possibilities are valuable possibilities that are tailored to a particular person and set of life circumstances. Two general rules apply here:

1. There are meaningful possibilities for every person in every consciously experienced situation. Meaning lies ready to be actualised, however a life situation may have come about.
2. What a person is unable to actualise is not a meaningful possibility. The logical reasons for this are as follows:
 - a) What people cannot do does not exist in the set of possibilities *for them*, and therefore it does not exist in the set of meaningful possibilities, which is a subset of their possibilities. What people cannot do is neither possible nor meaningfully possible for them.
 - b) What is possible for people can be actualised. Otherwise it would be “a possibility that is not a possibility”, which is a

contradiction. Because the set of meaningful possibilities is a subset of the set of possibilities, what is meaningfully possible is also actualisable.

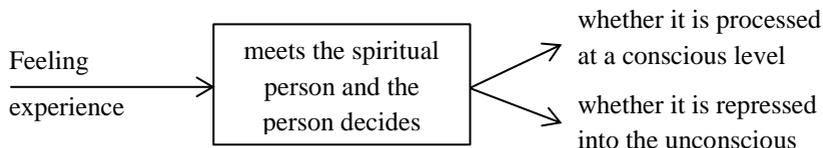
An example

The saying: “A lame person has the possibility of going for a walk, but is unable to actualise it”, is false. But this person may have the possibility of acquiring a wheelchair. This may be a meaningful possibility amongst that person’s possibilities, and it is actualisable. If this meaningful possibility is chosen, it will open up the further possibility of going on an outing in the wheelchair. Thus, the things that are actualisable can only be created successively out of the domain of what is currently possible.

The unconscious and automatism

The argument that people are responsible for what they choose from amongst the possibilities that exist for them stands in contrast with the depth psychological concept of repression, which assumes that there are unconscious forces acting in people that force them into actions (“choices”) that they would not consciously choose. Taken to its logical conclusion, this concept means that humans do not decide for themselves at all, but are driven and controlled by unconscious psychic impulses.

Logotherapy does not deny the phenomenon of repression, but it opens for discussion the question of *who* decides whether a feeling or an experience is repressed or not. Does a person – the spiritual person in the human being – not consider and decide whether or not to engage with an (unpleasant) thing with the conscious mind or push it into the unconscious? Ultimately a feeling cannot repress another feeling; the fork in the road at which we decide to process something consciously or let it stay unprocessed in the unconscious, must be controlled at a higher level than the thing that is being processed.



According to the above model, the spiritual person is also partly responsible for things that have been repressed and therefore cannot simply make the excuse of being controlled by impulses from the unconscious.

A few further perspectives

1. Some repression can even be meaningful, because it enables a person's conscious management of life not to be overwhelmed by too many difficult things at the same time. In general, nature has something in mind in everything that it does, and repression into the unconscious, which is a natural phenomenon that exists in every human being, plays a protective function, even though this protective function can become an illness in certain circumstances. The danger here is that patients who, with the help of a therapist, bring many painful experiences from their past into the light of consciousness, don't know what to do with this knowledge; this explains, for example, the high suicide rates psychotherapists in training who themselves undergo psychotherapy.

2. It is all too easy to behave in accordance with an established pattern (scripts) which one follows unconsciously. It is like a pianist dismissing mistakes in a performance because they were the result of learning a finger pattern incorrectly. No one denies that behaviour in daily life involves a series of automatisms, that conscious learning of a behaviour always precedes the formation of any automatism, just as a pianist practices finger patterns that later become increasingly automatic. But wherever something has become automatic through practice, it can be "unpracticed" and

something else practiced in its place, so there is no escaping responsibility for what becomes or remains an established pattern.

“A man jumps from a bridge into the water. Another man jumps after him to save him. After the rescue has been successful, we ask the second man how this decision was inwardly possible. He answers that it was not a question of making a decision; it is self-evident to him that he would try to save a life. The question, after all is said and done, is whether or not the man’s act can be said to have been an achievement, since it was self-evident for him. Were there not a number of other people crossing the bridge at the same time, and were they not equally witnesses to the danger to life, without having the thought to jump after the endangered man – in other words, without it being self-evident to them to jump, as it was to the other man?

We see that the achievement is the fact that it was self-evident to the man to jump. For it is by no means self-evident that something of that sort would be self-evident to anyone. Yes, that is the achievement: that it comes to pass, that someone makes it come to pass, that such a thing is self-evident. Nothing is self-evident, it only becomes self-evident. By repeatedly doing good things, one eventually becomes good.”⁷⁷

3. Years ago, there were a number of studies in experimental psychology about to what extent people could be unconsciously manipulated. These studies always found that manipulation is only possible when the person being manipulated has no spiritual ob-

⁷⁷ Viktor E. Frankl, *Der Mensch vor der Frage nach dem Sinn*, Piper Verlag, München, 2007, 20th ed., 260f.

jection. For example, in one study advertisements for Coca-Cola were flashed up on cinema screens for a fraction of a second in order to evoke an unconscious desire for Coke in the audience. This succeeded: after the film many of the cinemagoers flocked to a drinks stand in the street and asked for Coke. There was one exception: people who had been told not to drink Coke for medical reasons chose other drinks. The significance of this is clear: When people feel a desire to drink Coke and see no meaningful reason not to do so, they are very likely to buy Coke. If, however, they see a meaningful reason not to, they are equally likely not to buy Coke, even if an appetite for it has been manipulatively engendered. It follows that manipulated people are spiritually free to oppose their own feelings and needs even if they have been manipulatively influenced.

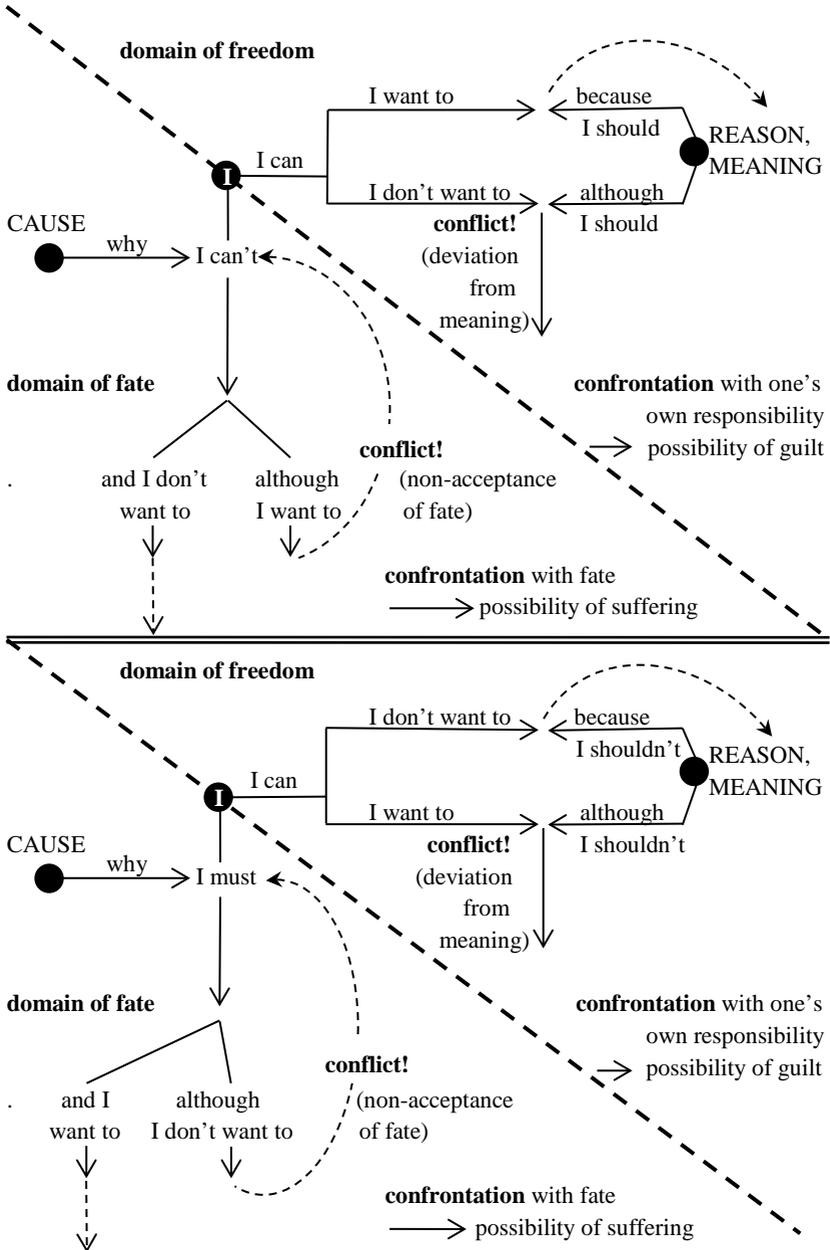
4. In contrast to the New Age movement, logotherapy does not believe that our lives are controlled by the stars and their constellations, but that we have to control them ourselves on our own, led by the guiding star inside us which is our conscience. Admittedly we cannot decide everything on our own, we are subject to the restrictions of unalterable fate, but we can do our own part, and that is more than enough. Logotherapy does share the hope for rethinking things, for a new way of thinking, though it would prefer to call it "reorientation". For thinking is one-sided, whereas orienting oneself is a dialog between the self that is oriented and that towards which it orients itself, between the measurer and the measurement, between the knower and the known, between the empowered spirit and the spirit of empowerment. The only orientation that is really capable of establishing a new age is orientation towards meaning.

Ten theses about the human capacity for decision

Ten theses follow from this logotherapeutic concept of the human being:

1. Human decisions are free acts of will that cannot be explained.
2. There are reasons for this free acts of will, but not causes.
3. These reasons do not explain the choice of a particular behavior, but only its meaning.
4. Humans can also make decisions contrary to meaningful reasons.
5. Causes are explanations for situations where no decision can be made.
6. Humans can also adopt a voluntary stance with respect to causes and their consequences.
7. This voluntary stance cannot alter what cannot be decided, but it may make it possible to accept it.
8. The conflict of wanting and not being able to do something, or not wanting to and being compelled, comes from engaging with the causes of not being able or being compelled to do something.
9. The conflict of wanting to do something that should not be done, or not wanting to something that should be done, comes from engaging with the reasons why something should or should not be done.
10. Engaging with causes is the same thing as confronting fate, whereas engaging with reasons is a confrontation with one's own freedom and responsibility.

Graphical illustration of the ten theses



Explanation of the ten theses and their graphical illustration

“Man is the being who decides in every moment what he will be in the next moment.” This statement by Viktor E. Frankl illustrates the central point of his teaching and his radical approach. It conflicts with Freud’s teachings about repression and with all theories that see human beings as the product of society. At the same time, it makes clear his great *trust in human beings*, which is both the weakest and the strongest argument that logotherapy has to offer. It is the weakest argument inasmuch as there can be no scientific proof of human spiritual freedom being the basis for the human capacity to make decisions. The witnesses to spiritual freedom, people who have made heroic decisions under the most difficult circumstances, are always in the minority, whereas all the others, who make no meaningful use of their capacity to decide and instead allow themselves to be let by their drives and feelings, are the majority. Sober, statistical facts always speak for an absence of human freedom.

But while trust in human beings and their power of decision which exists in spite of everything is the weakest theoretical argument for logotherapy, it is its strongest argument in practice. For this trust lifts the patient up, it appeals to his or her humanity and draws out spiritual energies that make it possible to overcome illness and suffering. People who experience themselves as victims of their circumstances and themselves as driven by unconscious forces will not lift a finger to heal themselves, for every form of dependency is crippling, even if it is only imagined. Only people who are aware of their own capacity to decide will take responsibility for what they decide in freedom.

Dependency and blame go hand in hand: An alcoholic thinks he has to drink because his wife has left him. Similarly, freedom and individual responsibility go hand in hand: An abstinent person does not drink, because he has decided to make his marriage work.

So let us acknowledge the existence of the *domain of freedom* in human life, and separate it from the *domain of fate*, as represented in the diagram by the dotted diagonal line. What do we find in the *domain of freedom*? Here is where we find “can”, “want” and “should”. What should be done exists in the space of what can be done, because it makes no sense to say that I should do what I cannot do. But not everything that should be done is wanted. Psychic conflicts in the *domain of freedom* involve wanting to do something that should not be done, or not wanting to do something that should be done, both of which involve deviating from meaning and accruing existential guilt.

“In view of this radical freedom we can also understand how rightly theology speaks of a *mysterium iniquitatis*: because our choices are ultimately free, they cannot be completely explained by appealing to deterministic factors, there is always something inexplicable left over, which remains a mystery. And if this mystery did not exist, we would have neither freedom nor responsibility, and there would also be no guilt. They would have been explained away.”⁷⁸

In fact, the problem of guilt stands and falls with the human capacity to make decisions. This can be seen, for example, in the way society deals with the phenomenon of criminality. The question always asked is what causes the criminality. Bad parenting, poverty, deprived living conditions, being led astray by bad role models, political repression and insufficient satisfaction of needs are most commonly mentioned as causes. Such theories of causation hang around the necks of people who have become criminals, because they do not feel taken seriously. It amounts to a claim that they are not compe-

⁷⁸ Viktor E. Frankl, *Der Mensch vor der Frage nach dem Sinn*, Piper Verlag, München, 2007, 20th ed., 220.

tent or in control, as though they were marionettes lying motionless on the ground because one of their strings has broken, or because someone has pulled on the wrong string. Who wants to feel like a marionette?

It undermines a person's worth and integrity to deny the guilt that he or she has acquired, and above all it makes impossible the only meaningful way of processing guilt: atonement in the form of somehow making things right again, even if it is just that the person concerned is made right again by changing and improving for the better. It is much more humane to accept the idea that there can be no final and complete explanation or clarification of human choices for or against meaning, because it has to do with a free act of the will, lying in the domain of what "can" be done.

Now let us look at the *domain of fate*, which lies on the opposite side of the diagonal to the *domain of freedom* in the diagram. What do we find here? Here is where we find "cannot", "must", and the causes of both. Here we find explanations (a why) and things that cannot be decided, and these also lead to conflicts, though they are of a different kind to the conflicts in the *domain of freedom*. The conflicts in the *domain of fate* involve wanting to do something that cannot be done, or not wanting to do something that must be done. There is no deviating from meaning, but there is non-acceptance of (seemingly meaningless) fate, which produces suffering.

But even in the face of unalterable suffering, humans still have freedom in their freely chosen attitude to that suffering. Thus, in an astonishing way, each of the two clearly delineated domains is permeated with the light of the other: in the *domain of fate* there is freedom in how one deals with one's fate, and in the *domain of freedom* there is a reason, a meaning, that eludes the human grasp, because it can be affirmed or denied, but it cannot be invented.

So the whole diagram reveals to us the optimal thing that can come out of confrontation with fate on the one hand and confrontation with individual responsibility on the other: wanting what should

be, not wanting what should not be, wanting what must be, and not wanting what cannot be. Wanting the right things is the only secret. People who orient themselves towards meaning and accept their fate are saved. People who do not orient themselves towards meaning, or do not accept their fate end up in a state of forsakenness that requires help and support from other people. As long as we keep both of these aspects in view, we will not go far wrong in our attempts to meet people in their forsakenness and lead them out of it.

A practical example

In the process of leading people out of a life crisis, strengthening the person's capacity for making decisions often has priority over other things. Thus, in the following we will use a concrete and relevant example to consider the question of what is fundamentally required to achieve such a desirable harmony between oneself and the *logos*.

To begin with, it is extremely important for people's peace of mind to stand inwardly behind what they do. It is just as important for them to do what they have decided to do. Thus, they must also stand behind what they have decided to do. *To decide, act accordingly, and stand behind* one's actions forms a stable triad. Anyone who upsets the balance of this triad sets off a psychically and physically dangerous inner conflict. To want and not want something at the same time, or to want it and not do it, or to do it without wanting it is demoralising for anyone. But such states are common. Nevertheless, this illustrates a number of aspects of being able to decide well, which includes being able to act on one's decisions and stand behind them.

The problem of not being able to decide well

The example we promised explains the problem of not being able to decide well. A pedicurist says: "I am looking for new and bigger practice rooms. These ones are too small and cramped." Ten minutes

later, she says: “My customers are mostly older people who are used to coming here. If I moved, many of them would find that disruptive and stop coming.” Is this pedicurist weighing up the pros and cons of moving her practice in a healthy fashion? Actually it suggests that she has moved a step further when she says, “I am looking ...” This makes it sound as though her decision is made. But then why does she say “if” in her next sentence (her customers will stop coming if she moves)?

If contradictions of this kind pile up, people like this pedicurist end up in a dilemma, that is, in a situation that seems increasingly insoluble. She wants to move and she does not want to move. Whatever she does, it is bad for her. This can be seen from the fact that the arguments in both of her sentences involve something bad:

1. It is bad that her existing practice is small and cramped.
2. It is bad that many of her customers will stop coming if she moves.

The technical language of ambivalence does not fully capture the essence of such a dilemma. Ambivalence means that someone is swinging back and forth like a pendulum between two values that cannot be simultaneously realised. A dilemma, on the other hand, means that one is stuck between two negative things, two things contrary to value, and it is as though one is caught in a pincer from which one cannot escape. Every decision that can be made is bad.

No one can decide *well* between two things that are contrary to value. It is psychically self-contradictory to decide for something bad. So if one decides between two such things, the desire for the value that was chosen against remains psychically alive and destroys one’s peace of mind. In the example of the pedicurist, for example, either decision leaves her with an unfulfilled desire, whether it is for a more comfortable practice or for the loyalty of her customers.

Option 1:

Externally she says yes to something that is contrary to one of her values: “OK, I’ll give up the idea of moving.” The inner desire for more comfortable practice rooms is still there. The result is that she keeps working bitterly in her old practice, and is annoyed about it every day.

Option 2:

Externally she says yes to something that is contrary to one of her values: “OK, I’ll give up my regular customers.” The desire for an uninterrupted stream of customers is still there. The result is that she sits bitterly in her new practice and is annoyed every day about having to find new customers.

Disagreeable options like this weaken people. Why? Well, even in the case of a dilemma a decision must be made; even if the person does nothing, this is a *de facto* decision. This means that the person *must* decide for something that is not wanted. What is done is not wanted, in a fundamental, general sense the person is “against” it.

Unfortunately many people live in a state of being permanently against things. The ship of their lives is sailing against the wind, which produces frustration, annoyance, anger or resignation. These unpleasant feelings direct their course and commit violence against either themselves or the people around them. Here are some possible scenarios in the example of the pedicurist:

Against the self

“I’m such a silly cow, I’ve been sitting in this hole for ten years just because I’m dependent on my customers!”

“I’m fed up with this move, now I’m just sitting here twiddling my thumbs!”

Against other people

“Nothing is done to help small businesses these days, they are just allowed to go under!”

“These stupid old people are so stuck in their ways that they can’t just go to a different place!”

Living in a state of being against everything undermines all life force. Joy withers away, unwillingness builds up, work is done less well, it becomes much more difficult to pull oneself together day by day. An inner desire for something different always has to be suppressed, as does the external expression of anger. This causes a loss of strength which reduces one’s flexibility and creativity. Fixated on the negative side of things (what one is against) one overlooks the opportunities that one might still have in one’s dilemma. In the case of the pedicurist, it might be possible for her to make her practice rooms more comfortable by rearranging the furniture, by renovation, by roofing in the balcony, or something like that. Or there might be ways of making the move less disruptive for her customers, by notifying them well in advance, by giving them a map of the new location, by offering them a free appointment in the new facility, and so on. But when people have already been psychically weakened, their imagination loses its wings.

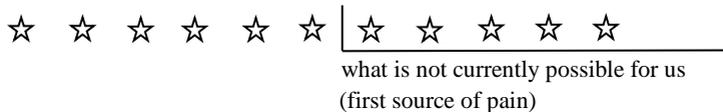
So what is the way out of the dilemma? In brief, one could say: one has to move away from always being against things and replace it with always being completely for things!

The role of being for things in the process of being able to decide well

To be completely for things, that is not just in one’s head, but also in one’s heart, alleviates four sources of pain that are inevitably associated with every decision process. It is useful to be clearly aware of these four sources of pain so that one can develop strategies for keeping them to a bearable level.



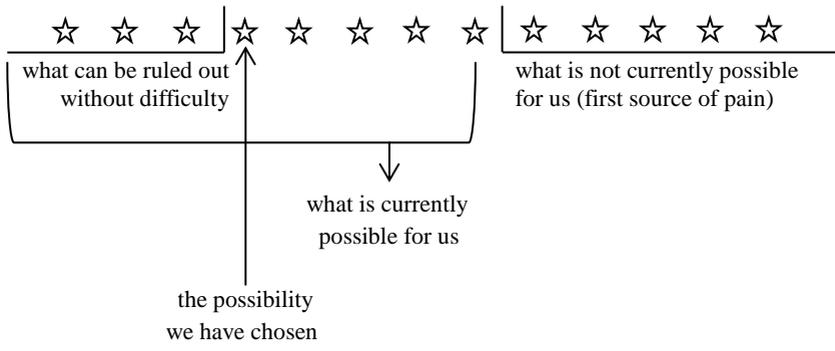
The stars above represent a set of possibilities. Happily, each of us has a number of possibilities available to us at every moment of our lives. It is, however, a restricted number, because certain possibilities do *not* (or *no longer*) exist for particular people. A sick person cannot go on a strenuous trip, an unemployed person cannot afford an expensive car, a person who is not musical cannot become a professional singer, and so on. Some possibilities are not available to us at a given point in time, as much as we might want them to be. They may be available to people around us, but not to us. We are not free to choose them. Fate denies us these things. Of course we are not interested in all of the things denied to us. For example, not everyone wants to go on a strenuous trip, buy an expensive car or become a professional singer. Some of the things denied to us are things that we would like to have if we had the choice. But unfortunately they are completely unattainable for us, and we have to accept this. This is the first source of pain: there are always beautiful, attractive possibilities in the world that are simply not possibilities for us.



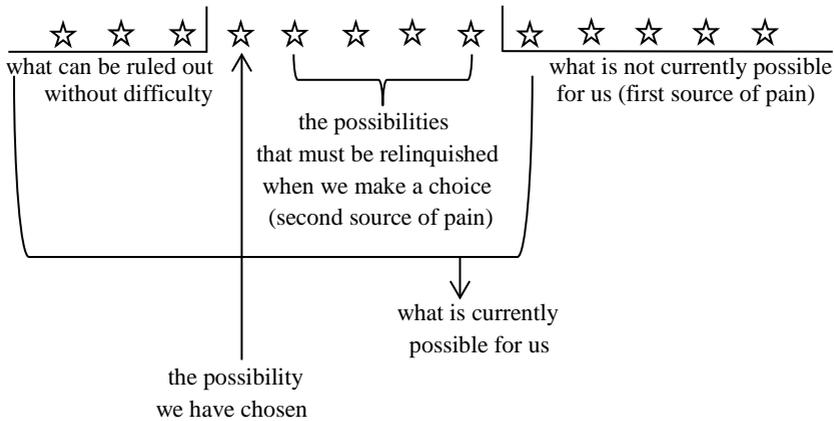
Let us look further at the decision process. What is not possible for us can be eliminated. We can also quickly eliminate the possibilities that can be ruled out without difficulty. Each of us has possibilities in every moment of our lives that are pathological, meaningless, ridiculous, or bad, and which we certainly do not intend to choose. We are perfectly free to run naked in the streets, give away all our possessions, stick a knife in our chest or eat bird feathers. In principle there is nothing to stop us doing these things, but we do not normally take possibilities like this into consideration.



If we remove what is not currently possible for us, as well as what can be ruled out without difficulty, we are left with the possibilities that exist for us at a given point in time. These are represented by the stars in the middle section. We make our decision by selecting one of these stars.



It sounds so easy to choose one of the stars representing what is currently possible for us, but there is another snag: to choose one of the possibilities means choosing against all of the other possibilities. If we decide for one of the stars in the middle section, we have to throw away all of the other stars voluntarily, at least for the moment, and this applies whether we like them or not. So we throw away the other stars even if we liked them, or would have liked them if we had actualised them. The second source of pain is already calling to us from the set of voluntarily relinquished possibilities, amongst which there are also beautiful and pleasant possibilities, which will now not come to pass in our lives, because we have decided for something else.



If we believe that the pain is over with the decision for a particular possibility and against all other possibilities, then we are mistaken. There are two more sources of pain associated with the star that represents the possibility we have chosen. The third source of pain concerns the inevitable downside of every choice. Because nothing in life is 100% ideal, there is no decision that does not have at least some unpleasant consequences. Sooner or later some effort will have to be made, something will have to be given up, as a result of our choice, even if no greater sacrifice is required.

But this is not all. If we decide for a particular possibility amongst the possibilities that are available to us, and if we are ready to accept the downside of our choice, we still have no guarantee that the course we have chosen will be successful. Every decision leads us into the unknown, and it is always possible that it will one day turn out to have been a bad decision that we bitterly regret. Because we are not clairvoyant, we are often unable to predict the consequences of our choices more than vaguely. We all know that something can be well meant without having a good outcome. Every decision carries risk, and this is the fourth source of pain.