Each of us has social responsibilities and ethical obligations to society. Many colleges and professional disciplines require courses in ethics; these courses invite students to reflect on their own moral values, many of which they have in common with other students, and enable them to understand these values and their implications more deeply. This reflection includes the interplay of these moral values in various practical domains, in their personal and professional lives. These courses help students to frame moral problems, as well as specific ethical dilemmas, to find ways of solving them, and also to uphold common and personal value systems. Thus, the classroom becomes a kind of laboratory in which we test moral theories and try out different points of view in helping students to come up with constructive solutions to moral problems.

One very important tool in framing moral issues and linking them to our own and to cultural values is the use of our “moral imagination.” That is, we picture various scenarios in trying to solve the given dilemma, and throughout the process of seeking answers, we always need to measure any possible solution in the context of the values to which we aspire. So moral imagination essentially is the ability to step outside of ourselves and analyze a given situation and imagine various solutions in terms of their moral content. It requires us “to disengage from one’s role, particular context; become aware of the scheme one has adopted and its particular context; then creatively envision new possibilities; and then evaluate the new possibilities, as well as the old context, and the range and conceptual schemes at work” (Werhane).

A most effective case study for teaching moral imagination is Viktor E. Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, in which he describes and, most importantly, analyzes his experiences as a prisoner in four of Adolf Hitler’s concentration camps, including Auschwitz. In this book, Frankl
(1905-1997), a Viennese psychiatrist, includes an autobiographical account and a theoretical account of his life work, “Logotherapy,” which is the “will to meaning,” and which requires the use of moral imagination. Frankl uses moral imagination when finding meaning in the worst, seemingly hopeless, situations, and also in ordinary, daily life.

At least some use of imagination is required for finding workable, moral solutions to problems. We learn to think creatively and to develop a moral imagination when we are children; we learn moral lessons by example and often through stories. As small schoolchildren in America many of us heard about George Washington and the cherry tree, and how George could not lie to his father. It did not then and does not now matter that this story is fabricated; if it is not true, the lesson is still valid. It taught us that even our heroes make mistakes, and that part of their heroic stature was and is achieved because they are honest and have integrity; they take responsibility and own up to their mistakes. To take responsibility for one’s action is, of course, an important lesson for every person, and helps us think of consequences when choosing actions. Such stories capture our imagination; we may identify with George Washington, for example, and imagine ourselves as the hero who “cannot tell a lie.”

Our students have received ethics training from their family, religion, schools, and the culture in which they are raised. I consider it my job in the classroom to invite the students to reflect on what they already know and to help them articulate what they value. If we know what we value and what we consider to be moral or ethical, then our moral imagination is the bridge between the given moral problem and its solution. To foster creative thinking in solving moral problems, I use literature as case studies, along with real-life case studies, because stories capture our imagination, both when we are children and as adults. Classic stories — in particular, literary works of art — reflect and sometimes help shape our society. They portray universal human dilemmas and give us frameworks for understanding our own emotions and showing us how to resolve problems and find meaning in them. We can use our imagination and creativity to formulate what we might do, and also to find inspiration to reach higher moral ground in our everyday lives. Stories take us out of ourselves and allow us to walk in someone else’s shoes; they open windows to other places and times, while at the same time they remind us how the human condition stays remarkably the same, no matter what the place or the time. Stories give us practice in creative and imaginative thinking, which we may then apply to our own “story,” or personal
dilemma, and which might even call for a moral change and require us to become somewhat different than we were before. This is the essence of moral imagination.

There is no greater terror than to be threatened with starvation and violent death every moment of the day — to be the innocent victims of the worst kind of human cruelty — as were those imprisoned in Hitler’s concentration camps. Not many of us in our own present-day Western society are faced with that kind of extreme challenge. Frankl’s autobiographical account of his time in the camps is a powerful example of how someone can use creative thinking, “moral imagination,” and the “will to meaning” to survive horrendous circumstances, as well as use that same creativity and will to develop coping mechanisms to prosper in every day life. The Library of Congress called Frankl’s book “one of the ten most influential books in America” in the twentieth century, and this true story has also captured my students’ imaginations.

As an undergraduate student, I was very fortunate to study for a year at the University of Vienna in Austria, and to have audited a course taught by Viktor Frankl on “Finding Meaning” (Spring 1963). His person and his teaching made a profound impression on me. He was a vibrant teacher, energetic, always in motion, pointing out that there is significance and meaning in every moment of our lives. To deny meaning even in the worst circumstances, according to him, was to give up on life, which to him was unthinkable. In this century-old medical theatre, with its seats sloping sharply upwards above the professor, he reached out to the students and invited them to question and to probe what it means to search for meaning. Even without the benefit of personally experiencing Frankl as a teacher, many of my students are similarly deeply affected by his book because they have to ask themselves how they might react in such extreme circumstances and if they could keep their humanity intact. There is no reliable answer to that, of course, but it is very moving and inspiring to learn how Frankl kept himself sane by his determination to find meaning in every moment, and how his integrity helped save his life. When Frankl talks about “finding meaning” we can infer a “moral meaning.” Every description and account of meaning in Frankl’s book is life-affirming and supports some basic moral value. Frankl finds meaning in suffering, and the moral value is that he affirms life and that the suffering allows him deeper insights into himself as well as others, which he considers morally desirable. His account is full of life lessons, and he gives a view of the world and human existence that goes far beyond the extreme circumstances of the concentration camps. Much of his approach to liv-
“Logotherapy” is a form of psychotherapy; it is an important part of Frankl’s modern version of his book. In the section “Logotherapy in a Nutshell,” he condenses some twenty volumes of information on his method of treating patients into just a hundred pages. He uses his concentration camp experience as an example of what logotherapy is and how it works. *Logos* is a Greek word and translates into “meaning.” Central to practicing logotherapy is the ability to find meaning in the worst situations; this requires that we use our moral imagination and think creatively and then “imagine/find” meaning in our lives, which also helps us to make ethical choices. Frankl had started to develop logotherapy when he was a practicing psychiatrist, before he was incarcerated in the camps. The camp experience, however, allowed him to refine and test this theory of how to approach everyday life and its problems.

Frankl’s logotherapy has been called “The Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy;” the second was Adler’s “will to power,” and the first was Freud’s “will to pleasure.” In comparing Frankl’s approach to theory and therapy with that of his famous predecessor, Sigmund Freud, with whom he had occasion to work, we find a significant difference (Frankl, p. 8). Frankl points to a conflict in “the will to meaning” as the source of existential frustration, rather than looking at the libido, “the will to pleasure,” and the unconscious motives as Freud did. According to Frankl, Freud was more past oriented, probing patients’ childhoods and adolescence to find answers to the problems patients were having as adults. Frankl, on the other hand, is oriented to the present and the future; he calls logotherapy “meaning-centered therapy” (Frankl, p. 104). We have to search actively for meaning in our present lives and believe that it exists. Frankl argues that there is always meaning in everyday life and that we have to seek it actively. That is why he talks about “will to meaning.” Frankl asserts that the meaning of life differs from person to person and from moment to moment; we do not need to contemplate the abstract meaning of life, because that does not engage us fully in the moment. As an example of the difference between his approach to existential problems and Freudian analysis, he gives the example of an American diplomat who sought him out in Vienna and told how deeply unhappy he was in his career and with American foreign policy, and that a Freudian analyst in New York had determined that he rebelled against authority (“the job”) because he hated his father. After five years of therapy nothing changed and he hoped that Frankl might help him. Frankl had a few ses-
sions with the man; he asked him about his career and then offered the solution that he just might want to change jobs to work on something that was meaningful to him. Five years later, the man reported that he was in a new job and that he was happy and fulfilled (Frankl, p. 107). This is a simple, but illuminating example of how a normal person may experience an existential crisis and suffering, and can change his life for the better by actively seeking meaning, in this case, in his work life.

The above example of logotherapy in everyday life provides a point of departure for students to think about their own future. Most of my students are able to empathize with Frankl’s account of his concentration camp experiences; and while they may not be able to imagine themselves in such extreme circumstances, they respond to the idea of finding meaning in the moment, no matter how profound or trivial that moment may be. Since logotherapy is oriented to the present and future, and our students are interested in how they themselves will face dilemmas in the “real world,” I ask them to use their moral imagination and to respond to various scenarios. These may be job-related, and they range from being asked to cover up mistakes, falsify data, or how to deal with boredom on the job. The scenarios may also be examples of their personal lives, such as losing a loved one or how to cope with illness. Whatever examples a teacher may choose, using Frankl’s logotherapy, the emphasis in the discussion needs to be on what is meaningful or gives meaning to the individual confronting the particular issue. The student working through a problem needs to ask or be asked a series of questions that will focus on finding out what is in keeping with what is meaningful for him or her. Some of these questions might be “What kind of a person do I wish to be? What do I want from my personal/professional life? What gives me a sense of purpose? How can I find value in this experience?” This is where moral imagination helps us to step back and imagine various scenarios that answer these questions and that may help solve various dilemmas, and that also help us discover our life’s meaning.

To be able to find our life’s meaning, we must acknowledge that each person is responsible for his/her own life, and that responsibility for oneself is at the center of human existence. Frankl calls it “responsibility,” and when faced by a moral dilemma, he calls on us to “live as if you were living already for a second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now” (Frankl, p. 114). This, of course, requires moral imagination: we have to believe in moral principles and know that we might act “wrongly.” We need to imagine the outcome of each possible act before we choose the “right” course of action. Frankl
is quick to point out that the logotherapy’s purpose is to widen and broaden “the visual field... so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes conscious and visible...” (Frankl, p. 115). He is telling us to “see” ourselves, our very existence, in terms of meaning. As long as we believe that there is meaning in every moment, in every action, we learn to activate our moral imagination, and that is when “the whole spectrum of potential meaning” expands. We reach a higher consciousness of the world around us, and we are less focused on ourselves. Frankl emphasizes that the “meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche” (Frankl, p. 115). That is, we see ourselves and our actions vis-à-vis the world, and using our moral imagination, we discover our meaning from moment to moment.

With the meaning we also find the purpose in our lives; for emphasis Frankl quotes Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how” (Frankl, p. 109). For example, it was Frankl’s “deep desire” to write while in the camps about his experiences and insights, and this desire gave purpose and meaning to his life, which helped keep him alive.

Most of us, including our students, understand that it is important to our mental health to have a reason to get up in the morning and to find meaning in everyday life. But we also know that, for various reasons, not all of us have the same “will to meaning,” and that even the use of our moral imagination does not allow some of us to transcend existential crises. At this point Frankl advises the individual who has trouble finding meaning and a reason to live, to take the following courses of action (Frankl, p. 115):

1. Create a work or do a deed.
2. Experience something or encounter someone.
3. Choose the attitude we take toward suffering.

In these activities we find meaning in our lives, which helps us make moral choices; all three actions require active participation, and active participation is what it takes to discover meaning in “any given moment.” Logotherapy stresses that we are responsible for creating meaningful and moral lives for ourselves, regardless of circumstances. Frankl calls this the “self-transcendence of human existence,” and only creative thinking and then taking action can achieve it. He asks us to use our human capacity for self-detachment to stand back and view our situation from afar, and then use our moral imagination to find meaning in a particular activity, behavior, experience, and that specific moment.
The first course of action to finding meaning in our lives, “create a work or do a deed,” is certainly important to our professional students at some point when they are working to find a place for themselves in our society and in a place of work. They have to find, or they think they have already found, an activity which helps define for them who they are and what kind of workers/people they aspire to be. The idea of finding value for themselves in work or in a deed is not new, and the students readily accept Frankl’s first suggestion for finding meaning and that this is indeed our individual responsibility.

The second course of action, “experience something or encounter someone,” can mean experiencing and finding meaning in nature or culture and includes possibly loving another human being. This is appealing to us; most of us have had or have the experience of loving or caring for someone or something. There is usually no argument that love can help us find meaning in our lives. Frankl explains that while sex may be a part of this love, he is referring to “that ultimate togetherness” which he calls love (Frankl, p. 116).

It is the third course of action, “choosing the attitude we take toward suffering,” that is the most difficult, and which is at the center of Frankl’s life experience and his logotherapy. It is also central to many a moral dilemma, where doing the “right” thing might be difficult because it may require suffering on our part.

Here is where Frankl’s belief that “what matters… is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment” becomes most important (Frankl, p. 113). When the first two courses of actions, finding meaning in work and love, are not available to us, for whatever reasons, then finding meaning in a particular personal dilemma is the first step in restoring meaning to our lives. This is the focus of Frankl’s book; he describes to us how he could find meaning and a reason to live in the concentration camp. We can infer that if we can find meaning in such dire circumstances, then we can find it in all other life circumstances.

Frankl describes how he and some of the other inmates were able to survive the camps and eventually find meaning in the experience. His focus is on the inner life of the prisoners; he states:

In spite of all the enforced physical and mental primitives of the life of the concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain (they were often
of a delicate constitution), but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom. Only in this way can one explain the apparent paradox that some prisoners of a less hardy make-up often seemed to survive a camp life better than did those of a robust nature (Frankl, p. 47).

Some of the prisoners were able to use their imagination to escape from the reality of the camp. Frankl describes how by turning to their inner life, the prisoners often experienced the beauty of art and nature more intensely. Some of them developed or kept a sense of humor and joy to help them with their suffering. The smallest thing, the sight of grass or trees or better weather, or dreams about the future would bring joy and push out the suffering for a time. Frankl himself would think of the love he felt for his wife (who died in a concentration camp), or he pretended to be lecturing to medical students, and on a particularly notable occasion actually did lecture, upon request, to his fellow inmates.

It was easy for prisoners to sink into deep despair and to lose all sense of values, and to doubt everything in which they ever believed. Frankl points out that prisoners, or anyone in dire circumstances for that matter, have to struggle to keep their values and their sense of self-respect. At that point, it is a stretch to believe that we still have a choice in the attitude we take toward suffering. But if we are able to do so, we may lift our spirit out of total despair. For example, in spite of the advice of his friends, and the threat of a fatal infection, Frankl volunteered to help treat typhus patients because he thought that he would rather die as a doctor helping his fellow inmates than die as a prison laborer. This decision made him feel like a human being, rather than a number, and he continued to use every opportunity to preserve his self-respect and his sense of who he believed he was. At one point he refused a “sure thing” opportunity to escape the camp because he felt that he needed to stay with his patients. It turned out that his decision to stay saved his life; all of the escapees were killed. In the end, he lived mainly because he used his moral imagination and let his humanity and his integrity as a person with values intact guide his behavior and his decision-making.

So, it becomes most important, in any circumstances, to preserve an independence of mind and to adhere to a value system that allows us to lead a life of integrity. Frankl states that “the experience of camp life does show that man has a choice of action,” and when there is no longer a possibility of taking action, then we are left with “the last of the human
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freedoms — to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl, pp. 74-75). This choice of attitude cannot be taken away; we use our moral imagination to find the attitude that gives purpose and meaning to our lives.

“Choosing an attitude” puts the responsibility of who we are, and who we want to be as people, on ourselves. This implies that we have free will, and that with this freedom comes responsibility. Once we understand the circumstances, we must not blame our failings on the outside world, but we need to take ownership of all that we are and want to be. We are responsible for our decision-making and whether it is ethical or not. Frankl’s account of his experience and his call to take responsibility and to find meaning in our lives gives us, and the students, a powerful mental model for ethical behavior.

The concepts of moral imagination and, in my opinion, also moral autonomy are important parts of this mental model. Both are required as part of our ethical decision-making capability and our search for meaning. The operating definition of “moral autonomy” that I use in my classes is that “moral autonomy is reached when the individual makes moral choices based on what is right and for the general good balanced with one’s own needs and the needs of others.” (Martin and Schinzinger, p. 19) This, of course, requires moral imagination, because one needs to determine “what is right.” Frankl addresses moral autonomy indirectly; he talks about our conscience as the “prompter,” which points us in a particular direction. (Frankl, p. 146) To do that, we have to evaluate a set of values which we hold paramount, and imagine the kind of human we want to be. When Frankl had to decide whether to take a seemingly sure opportunity to flee or to stay with his patients in the camp, he had to analyze his situation and then make a life or death decision. He imagined what it would be like to leave, and how he would feel, and he asked himself what it meant to him to stay. He weighed both the old context and the new, and because he believed that the “will to meaning” is the deciding factor in moral decision-making (his conceptual scheme), he chose to stay because in his moral schemata, doctoring his patients was more important than escape from the camp. The fact that this decision actually saved his life is of secondary importance because, most of all, he wanted to find meaning as a caring human being; and he achieved that, regardless of whether he lived or died. He states:

…it seemed to me that I would die in the near future. In this critical situation, however, my concern was different from
that of most of my comrades. Their question was, “Will we survive the camp? For if not, all this suffering has no meaning.” The question which beset me was, “Has all this suffering, this dying around us a meaning? For if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance — as whether one escapes or not — ultimately would not be worth living at all (Frankl, p. 119).

Frankl believes that in accepting suffering or inescapable circumstances, our lives retain meaning to the last moment. We can also see this point of view in our reaction as American people to “9/11,” the national tragedy of the destruction by terrorists of the World Trade Center, part of the Pentagon, and the plane crash in Pennsylvania. Thousands of innocent lives were lost; and we immediately honor them, and we recoil from the evil and the hatred that causes such loss of life and suffering. We believe that the lives of the victims have meaning, and we tell and listen to the heroic stories of individual citizens, and the firemen, and the police who died or were injured to save others. In the face of such suffering we are inspired to stand together, reaffirm our individual and cultural values, while we prepare to fight for them. The young man, for example, who on 9/11 did not leave one of the towers with other colleagues so that he could stay and comfort his quadriplegic friend, and who thus knowingly chose death, becomes our hero. Though he died, his action has meaning because comforting his disabled friend was his ultimate value at that moment and we are uplifted knowing that such selfless caring exists. There are many such stories of 9/11: firemen who went up the stairs of the towers, into the inferno, to try to save lives, rather than think of their own well-being. These people knowingly took actions that put them at grave risk or guaranteed certain death, but affirmed higher values, such as caring about the lives of others to the detriment of their own lives. These acts gave meaning to their lives and our memories of them.

Whether it is students taking a course in ethics and reading about the holocaust in Frankl’s book, or our nation watching television and seeing how innocent people are slaughtered in our own and other countries, we all have to think about the values that result in such violence and the values that we want to uphold and represent. Terrorism in the age of technology has changed our world, and we are faced with a course of action that shows who we are, as individuals and as a nation. Frankl’s
third approach to discover meaning in life, “the attitude we take toward suffering,” has new meaning for us since September 11, 2001. As a nation we seem determined to turn our suffering into triumph and to show that a terrorist enemy will not defeat us; as a nation we resist seeing ourselves as victims and grasp for meaning and comfort in democratic principles and in patriotism.

On an individual level, finding meaning is more complex and is much influenced by what we personally experience, how we see ourselves as people, and also who we want to be, and which values have the most meaning for us. We also disagree with each other on the course of action we need to take as a nation in the age of terrorism. But we do have “the will to meaning.” I like to think that ultimately our students and most of us aspire to be ethical human beings and are always looking to find guidance to do what we hope is right. Frankl, through logotherapy and using the holocaust as example, reminds us of what we saw unfold on 9/11: That both the holocaust and the terrorist attack show us what humans are capable of and what is at stake. We have seen in the past, and in the present the worst, and also the best of human behavior. Using our moral imagination, we have to make use of, as Frankl puts it, “the last of the human freedoms,” and choose our attitude and ultimately be responsible for the actions we take.

Thus, Viktor Frankl has offered us his years of experience and observation in the camps as a case study. He saw there, as well as in his life after the camps, the importance of fostering “the will to meaning” in people. This will to lead a meaningful life is activated by moral imagination, which is also guided by our conscience. Every action we take from moment to moment is to be seen in the context of meaning, which heightens our awareness of long and short-term goals. We are responsible for our attitude in our quest for meaning, and as a result, we develop our consciousness and a self-observing ego. We are able to step outside of ourselves and take actions to meet the goals that will help define ourselves as persons and as professionals. On one level we define ourselves as members of a society, on another we define ourselves as the kind of human beings we wish to be. Identifying this freedom of choosing who we want to be as human beings and members of a society is one of the most important messages that come out of the discussions in class on *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl’s book teaches the students and us that we are not victims, nor cogs in a machine; we are sentient beings who, using our moral imagination, can choose the meaning of our lives and
then act on this, keeping in mind our social and ethical obligations to ourselves and to our society.

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NOTES

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2 As pointed out by philosopher Michael Pritchard, Western Michigan University.

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