**"Bring Words back from their Metaphysical to their Everyday Use" – Meaning in Life through Ordinary Language Use[[1]](#footnote-2)**

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1. **Introduction**

A sense of meaning in life has been found to be essential for living a full life, for a sense of well-being, and for strengthening a person’s resilience in the face of adversity and crisis.[[2]](#footnote-3) Psychologists, psychiatrists, and other therapists testify that these days more people seek treatment out of a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness,[[3]](#footnote-4) or, as the psychoanalyst Michael Eigen put it, out of “a sense of psychic deadness.”[[4]](#footnote-5) On the surface, many people’s lives may appear healthy, successful, and even meaningful; however, this may be accompanied by a sense of “inner deadness,” stagnation, or a lack of psychic animation. This can stem from various sources and is manifest in different guises, from a complete lack of passion for life, apathy, and inability to make decisions, to people whose psychic deadness takes over all aspects of life and transforms it into an experience of ongoing suffering. The most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5), which was published in 2013, even includes a separate chapter titled “Depressive Disorders,” which lists symptoms such as negative mood, hopelessness, lack of interest in everyday activities, exhaustion, lack of energy, changes in appetite, feelings of worthlessness, indecision, and others.[[5]](#footnote-6)

As part of the field of existential psychotherapy, which aims to address universal existential concerns,[[6]](#footnote-7) a new method of therapy has emerged in the last three decades called “Meaning Therapy.” This is a positive integrative approach to counseling and psychotherapy with roots in the Logotherapy of Viktor Frankl, a student of Freud and the founder of the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy. The starting point of Meaning Therapy is that the main motivation in human life is the will to meaning.[[7]](#footnote-8) This kind of therapy (or counseling) aims to help clients[[8]](#footnote-9) discover or infuse meaning into their lives, and as such to equip them with tools to deal with life’s challenges, with the unavoidable suffering, with changing life circumstances and uncertainty. This therapeutic approach urges the subject to take responsibility for their decisions, choices, and actions.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Such therapeutic approaches, whose popularity in the Western world has skyrocketed in the last few decades, have filled the void left by classical psychotherapy. In the post-modern era, which is characterized by doubt in the concept of “Truth,” challenging of values, and constant change and uncertainty about the future (including, due to the climate crisis, the question of whether life on Earth will continue), psychological analysis that limits itself to the patient’s perspective has abandoned questions in the realm of value, such as the question of the meaning of life.

Psychoanalysis focuses on a causal study of the subject’s mental (and partially also physical) phenomena, and as such sheds light on the deterministic-biological aspect of the human psyche. Since Freud’s time, symptoms have been seen as meaningful and as connected to the patient’s past experiences.[[10]](#footnote-11) Through analysis – interpretation or translation of symptoms, dreams, and mistakes, such as slips of the tongue, slips of the pen, forgetfulness, and more – it is possible to trace the source of problems observed on the surface – to the depths of the unconscious. The assumption is that exposing the causal relation between the symptom and its source leads to healing. The analysis thus serves as an *interpretation* and *translation* of symptoms in that it raises their unconscious roots to the surface. However, psychoanalysis’ focus on instincts, on impulses, or the causes of mental states, has left unanswered many questions within the ethical realm, which focus, among other things, on a subject’s need for a meaningful life.

There is a great deal of subjective choice when it comes to the way one grasps the meaning of one’s own life, or the attitude one adopts towards life; the answer to these questions need not be causal. In Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (one of the best-selling books worldwide), he provides a first-person description of the shocking experiences he endured in both body and soul in concentration camps such as Auschwitz and Dachau.[[11]](#footnote-12) In this description, he says that even among the SS guards some took pity on the prisoners. He describes, for example, how it became clear after the war that a commander of the camp from which Frankl was released, had paid significant sums of money from his own pocket to purchase medicine for prisoners. In contrast, Frankl describes a senior camp warden who was a prisoner himself and behaved more cruelly than any SS officer. In other words, nothing can be concluded from the fact that a person belongs to a particular group; human generosity can be found anywhere, even in the cruelest places imaginable.

Observing Holocaust survivors, they also serve as an example of the possibility of subjective choice and our inability to predict the future based on events of the past. Among the survivors, there were many who, like Viktor Frankl, managed to establish meaning to their lives after the war and even to live full and meaningful lives, whereas others, like Paul Celan and Primo Levi, who decided to end their lives years after being released from the concentration camps. The fact that people experienced something in their past does not necessarily attest to their present and future actions, choices, or attitudes. This lacuna within Freud’s psychoanalysis was also demonstrated by the pioneer of the early 20th century linguistic-philosophical turn, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951).

The present article aims to offer a method of conceptual investigation that is inspired, or more precisely guided, by early and late Wittgenstein;[[12]](#footnote-13) a method that can then be utilized to help clarify the concept of “meaning in life” and the processes involved in its realization. “Meaning in life” is, of course, an abstract and elusive concept that is involved in abstract and complex processes, the sources and causes of which are difficult to pinpoint and track. This raises the question of how such a concept can be investigated and studied. This paper will discuss the two revolutions that Wittgenstein sparked in the study of language, as they are reflected in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (the *Tractatus*), published in 1921, and his *Logical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953. Discussing these two revolutions will supply the foundations for the proposed qualitative-empirical method of inquiry that can be applied in the clarification of ethical (and aesthetic) philosophical concepts, such as the one at the heart of this paper. In so doing, it will also draw a straight methodological line between Wittgenstein’s early work and his later work.

1. **Meaning through Language – the Limits of the Inquiry**

Wittgenstein’s groundbreaking treatise *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* belongs toa tradition within analytic philosophy that developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which used logical tools and analytic examination of language to critique and to expose the nonsensicality of earlier metaphysical traditions. The purpose of analytic philosophy was to “clean” philosophical discourse from confusion and to conduct controlled and rigorous inquiries by which concepts could be clarified and sensible claims could be distinguished from claims that are the outcome of misuses of language and are therefore senseless or nonsense. Analytic philosophers aspired to utilize an ideal (logical) language to reach objectivity and universality.

That the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is included within this tradition can already be concluded from its introduction. In the introduction, Wittgenstein declares that the book deals with a range of different philosophical challenges, among them “the problem of life,”[[13]](#footnote-14) and argues that the source of many of these challenges is “that the logic of our language is misunderstood.”[[14]](#footnote-15) As Wittgenstein explains, the essence of the book is “to draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for in order to draw a limit to thinking, we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.”[[15]](#footnote-16)

Wittgenstein was the first philosopher to draw a straight line between the creation of a sense of meaning in life and the constitution of linguistic meaning – in language. The three sections of the *Tractatus* that address this relation explicitly are the following:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value⁠—and if there were, it would be of no value. If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental. It must lie outside the world.[[16]](#footnote-17)

Hence also there can be no ethical propositions. Propositions cannot express anything higher.[[17]](#footnote-18)

It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one.)[[18]](#footnote-19)

Toward the end of the *Tractatus*,[[19]](#footnote-20) Wittgenstein makes good on his promise from its introduction. He shows us how a philosophical question such as the question of the meaning of life is meaningless – whether it is a semantic question that attempts to clarify the meaning of the world or an ethical question that attempts to clarify the value and purpose of life.[[20]](#footnote-21) This is so because talking about the meaning of life is meaningless. Ethics must essentially be transcendental, and because it is transcendental, it can have no expression in language. Why? Because ethics speaks of absolute, unconditional, values that dictate how one should or how it is appropriate for one to live. Yet, if life has absolute and unconditional value, this cannot be demonstrated by the contingent facts of life. To understand the sense of the world one must be outside it, and that, of course, is impossible.[[21]](#footnote-22)

To see why Wittgenstein thought that ethics and aesthetics, which he took to be identical, cannot be expressed in language, we must first understand the distinction he draws between logical propositions, empirical propositions that describe the world, and ethical and aesthetical propositions. Of logic, Wittgenstein says:

The propositions of logic are tautologies.[[22]](#footnote-23)

The propositions of logic therefore say nothing. (They are the analytical propositions.)[[23]](#footnote-24)

Logical research means the investigation of all regularity. And outside logic all is accident.[[24]](#footnote-25)

The study of logic concerns necessary laws. In the propositions of logic there is no chance, they are derived a priori and therefore say nothing about the world. In contrast, everything outside of logic is accidental. In this sense, a “genuine” law involves necessity, and, as such, only logical necessity exists. Everything that lacks logical necessity must therefore be accidental. In this way, Wittgenstein undercuts the possibility of natural necessity. According to Wittgenstein, the propositions of logic mark the limits of the world, that is, all that can be expressed in language. In contrast, natural propositions, such as the propositions of the natural sciences that describe the world, are not logical and therefore are not necessary. They describe worldly states of affairs, or facts, and their truth value is contingent upon empirical proof.

By contrasting what Wittgenstein says about logic with what he says about the world, his significant claim about the world emerges: that it is contingent. With this claim, Wittgenstein rejects the law of causality that Freud placed at the foundation of his psychoanalytic theory and with which our discussion began.

The law of causality is not a law but the form of a law.[[25]](#footnote-26)

There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened. The only necessity that exists is logical necessity.[[26]](#footnote-27)

States of affairs are independent of one another.[[27]](#footnote-28)

From the existence or non-existence of one state of affairs it is impossible to infer the existence or non-existence of another.[[28]](#footnote-29)

Wittgenstein shows that the law of causality does not express necessity, and therefore, as he emphasizes, is not a law but a form of a law. There is no necessity in the world that would compel us to think that one thing will lead to another or that from one state of affairs we could infer another. Necessity exists only in logic. That is, from the events of the past it is impossible to infer or predict the events of the future or the present:

There is no possible way of making an inference from the existence of one situation to the existence of another, entirely different situation.[[29]](#footnote-30)

We *cannot* infer the events of the future from those of the present.   
Superstition is nothing but belief in the causal nexus.[[30]](#footnote-31)

Immediately after rejecting the law of causality and our ability to infer one event from another, Wittgenstein turns to discuss freedom of the will. He emphasizes that it is embodied in our inability to predict future actions.

The freedom of the will consists in the impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future. We could know them only if causality were an *inner* necessity like that of logical inference […][[31]](#footnote-32)

We can now return to ethical and aesthetical propositions and clarify what Wittgenstein means when claiming that ethics is transcendental, by appealing to another of his texts. In “A Lecture on Ethics,” which Wittgenstein delivered in Cambridge in 1929, he looks at different synonyms of “ethics” and shows that what is common to them all is that each is used in two senses – relative and absolute, and that a fact cannot be transformed into an absolute judgment. Beyond the fact that properties such as “good” or “bad” do not “belong” to objects but are attributed to them by people,[[32]](#footnote-33) Wittgenstein emphasizes that a fact that is describable in language cannot be good or bad. In other words, ethical and aesthetical propositions involve absolute, non-accidental, values, and therefore cannot describe states of affairs in a world where everything is accidental.

Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water and if I were to pour out a gallon over it.[[33]](#footnote-34)

Accordingly, an answer to an ethical question can be personal, particular, and contextual, but cannot be expressed in scientific-objective language. In this, Wittgenstein is expressing a position similar to that of the 19th-century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855),[[34]](#footnote-35) who believed that ethics, which is intertwined with subjective truth, goes beyond scientific-objective language.[[35]](#footnote-36) For Wittgenstein, ethics is described as “supernatural” or transcendental. That is, for both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein ethics is bound up with subjective experience. It therefore goes beyond the limits of the world and of language and cannot be communicated directly or expressed scientifically.[[36]](#footnote-37) In this respect, as Wittgenstein emphasized, “The *limits of my language* mean the limits of my world,” that is, the subject is the limit of the world.

The *limits of my language* mean the limits of my world.[[37]](#footnote-38)

I am my world. (The microcosm.)[[38]](#footnote-39)

The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world.[[39]](#footnote-40)

At each step, the *Tractatus* directs us toward an understanding that we must abandon the possibility of solving the general, universal, question of the meaning *of* life. According to Wittgenstein, this question has no answer, and even if it does – we have no way of knowing it. As such, the question is nonsensical. Instead, Wittgenstein directs us toward what we should *do*.[[40]](#footnote-41) The purpose of philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is “the logical clarification of thoughts.” And, he adds: “philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.”[[41]](#footnote-42) Philosophical *activity* is contrasted with the silence with which Wittgenstein seals the *Tractatus* in his most quoted sentence:

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.[[42]](#footnote-43)

It must now inquire whether the silence that Wittgenstein advocates at the end of the *Tractatus* entails that we cannot speak, and a fortiori investigate, the concept of “meaning *in* life.” An answer to this question is critical for the possibility of understanding the concept of “meaning in life”, which is at the center of this paper. In light of *Philosophical Investigations*, which I will discuss in the next section, I wish to adopt an interpretation according to which the silence Wittgenstein suggests does not mean that it is useless to speak about meaning in life; rather, it is a demand for “scientific humility” – silence as expressing the recognition that some claims can neither be proven nor refuted.[[43]](#footnote-44) The two branches that attempt to provide answers to the question of the meaning of life – science and religion – fail to do so.[[44]](#footnote-45)

Wittgenstein, himself, does not remove from the discussion such familiar feelings as the feeling of wonder at the very existence of the world, the feeling of absolute security, of delight, and of guilt; rather, he shows that even though there is some absolute value in such feelings, they are no more than experiences that have occurred at a specific place and time, that had a beginning and have come to an end. Therefore, it is meaningless to say that they have some inherent, absolute, supernatural, value. To those who object that such experiences have absolute value and that this is a fact like all others, though one for which a logical description has yet to be found, Wittgenstein responds that not only is there no way to describe these expressions but their nonsensicality is their essence. Everyone who deals with these matters tends to push against the limits of the world, against the limits of language, and that, of course, is hopeless.

For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language […] This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science.[[45]](#footnote-46)

How might one, nonetheless, experience life as meaningful? Wittgenstein’s solution is grounded in an attitude shift: “one must want life by experiencing it as something wonderous.”[[46]](#footnote-47) In this respect, ethics and aesthetics are one and the same, not only because their propositions are meaningless, but because both give expression to a certain attitude toward life, that is, to the subject’s individual choices.[[47]](#footnote-48) In this respect, ethics and aesthetics are identical, because both emphasize the “how” and not the “what,” that is, the form of the expression rather than its essence.

Summarizing our discussion of Wittgenstein’s first revolution in the study of language and its relevance to the conceptual clarification of the concept of “meaning in life,” the *Tractatus* seemingly leaves us at a dead end. Wittgenstein marks a clear boundary between what can be empirically investigated and is within the limits of language, and what is beyond the limits of language, and therefore cannot be empirically investigated. As a metaphysical question that aims to articulate the universal meaning of life, the question is nonsensical and so there is no point in addressing it. Yet, from the fact that we have no way of approaching the general meaning *of*life, it cannot be concluded that it is impossible to speak of how a subject constitutes a particular meaningful life. People can provide linguistic expression to how they grasp the meaning of their lives. As a result, people’s linguistic expressions of their attitudes toward life can serve as the subject matter of an investigation that focuses on everyday linguistic expressions. As part of Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy as an activity that purports to clarify ideas and thoughts, it is thus possible to clarify the concept within the limits of language. That is, it is possible to take the subject to be the limit of the investigation and his choices and attitudes to serve as instruments in the clarification. Wittgenstein’s second revolution in the study of language will further ground this research method.

1. **Meaning in Ordinary Language Use**

In his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein brought about a revolution in his understanding of language that has significant implications for the study of language. In its very first section, he rejects the Augustinian picture, which is representative of the referential theory of meaning, according to which “every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.”[[48]](#footnote-49) In his later thought, Wittgenstein attacks the notion, which he too shared, that logic is “sublime” and that its study provides a glimpse into the structure of thought and the deep structure of language. While in the *Tractatus* meaning is understood along the axis between language and the world, in *Philosophical Investigations* meaning is determined by the use of language within a particular form of life.[[49]](#footnote-50)

By appealing to everyday language, Wittgenstein illustrates, much as Frege did,[[50]](#footnote-51) that these assumptions, along with the assumptions of logic, are mistaken. He suggests that we treat words and sentences as pieces in a game and emphasizes that “[…] the meaning of a word is its use in language.”[[51]](#footnote-52) In this respect, meaning is no more than a role within a specific game. Thus, Wittgenstein moves away from the logical picture of language and turns the spotlight to other characteristics of language that depend on how people use it.

*Philosophical Investigations* includes a criticism of semantic and scientific truths and reflects a shift in thought concerning the study of language. Wittgenstein replaces the logical vocabulary that includes such concepts as “reference,” “correspondence,” “rules,” “categories,” etc., with a dynamic vocabulary that includes such concepts as “use,” “family resemblance,” and “language games.” The study of language is no longer treated as an activity whose goal is to uncover logical structures that underlie the foundations of language. Rather it is taken to be a practice that traces different ways of using language, which is now perceived as a living and changing mechanism with many varied functions that serves not only to convey thoughts but other human purposes.[[52]](#footnote-53)

At the same time, transitioning to meaning in use does not entail abandoning the search for the abstract essence or common denominator among the varied uses of language. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein still adhered to his Tractatian notion that “essence is expressed in grammar”[[53]](#footnote-54) and that “grammar tells us what kind of object anything is (Theology as grammar).”[[54]](#footnote-55) According to (later) Wittgenstein’s methodological directive, even if concepts do not have clear boundaries, they can still be studied based on their usage. Thus, for example, Wittgenstein thought that there is no hierarchy between words or concepts in language:

[…] If the words “language,” “experience,” “world” have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words “table,” “lamp,” “door.”[[55]](#footnote-56)

According to Wittgenstein, there are no higher-order (metaphysical) words or super-concepts, just as there is no meta-language.[[56]](#footnote-57) Accordingly, Wittgenstein urges us to ground all metaphysical concepts, which are the objects of our philosophical investigations, and to investigate them in their real usage in everyday language:

When philosophers use a word – “knowledge,” “being,” “object,” “I,” “proposition/sentence,” “name” – and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? – What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.[[57]](#footnote-58)

If we adopt Wittgenstein’s methodological directive, we can describe and clarify a philosophical-psychological concept such as “meaning in life,” its contents, aspects, and modes of constitution by tracing how it is used in language. The notion of “meaning in use” means that what gives words meaning is their concrete use. In other words, to clarify the meaning of some concept, we need nothing more than to trace its actual usage in everyday language. Such an investigation will not strive to uncover an abstract meaning that dictates how a word is or will be used, because in everyday language there is no necessity. Language is constantly changing, it operates in different ways, people use it for different purposes, old and new, and in so doing they expand and redefine its boundaries. This conception of languages is captured nicely in Wittgenstein’s metaphor of “language as a city.”[[58]](#footnote-59)

My proposal is, thus, to follow Wittgenstein and reevaluate the meaning of the concept “meaning in life” according to its concrete usage in everyday language. Given that the question of the meaning of life is a subjective question that largely involves the subject’s choice, the best way to investigate it is through a relational investigation that reflects the intentions of the speaker at a particular point in time and within a particular context.

This mode of investigation can be incorporated into a qualitative research program, based on in-depth interviews, which is first and foremost characterized by being conducted in the language of words.[[59]](#footnote-60) Thus, I suggest that we acknowledge the possibility of carrying out a conceptual investigation by means of the qualitative research method that has gained popularity in the last few decades across many disciplines. In the course of such interviews, participants are asked to respond to questions concerning their conception of the meaning of their life from a subjective perspective. “A Lecture on Ethics,” which has been discussed in the previous section, provides suggestions for questions concerning the way a person conceives of the meaning of his life. To clarify the subject matter of ethics to his audience, Wittgenstein presents a range of phrases that are synonymous with “ethics,” and in so doing attempts to paint a picture, as he says, of their common characteristics.

Now instead of saying “Ethics is the enquiry into what is good” I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living.[[60]](#footnote-61)

This quotation has two important implications for our purposes: First, it provides an example of the application of a research methodology that aims to clarify a philosophical concept such as “ethics” by attending to its synonymous expressions in language. Second, it provides examples of concrete questions that we can ask when we turn to investigate, directly or indirectly, how people grasp the meaning of their lives, for example: What is important for you in life? What do you take to be valuable? What makes your life meaningful and worth living? What do you think is the correct way to live life? Such qualitative inquiry can provide a perspective on different ways that certain subjects at a certain time constitute meaning to their lives, and, in this respect, provide a linguistic corpus of everyday expressions that are synonymous with the concept “meaning in life” and expose its relevance in the lives of the research participants.

Additionally, a qualitative investigation for the purposes of conceptual clarification can utilize other methodological tools that Wittgenstein makes available in the *Investigations*. Investigating the different uses can be carried out within the framework of language games. In Socratic form, Wittgenstein shows us that nothing in common can be found among everything that we call “game,” such as board games, games of imagination, ball games, etc. The only things common among them are “similarities, affinities,” which he calls “family resemblances” – the resemblance, which cannot be characterized clearly, that holds among family members.[[61]](#footnote-62) In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposes that we treat language as a collection of language games, that is, as an entire set of behaviors that serve different purposes among groups of people.[[62]](#footnote-63) The centrality of the concept “language game” in Wittgenstein’s later thought emphasizes the fact that speaking a language is “part of an activity, or of a form of life.”[[63]](#footnote-64) In other words, speaking a language is part of a wider context and is a changing, emergent, thing. It is, therefore, also unpredictable and ungrounded. This conception of language as a collection of “language games” reflects a sharp departure from traditional logical categorization and turns the spotlight onto language use.[[64]](#footnote-65) In light of this conception, which examines meaning in use, we can inquire as to which language games speakers play when speaking of the meaning of their lives and identify some “family resemblance” between them.

The conception of meaning in use also sets in advance the limits of the investigation. A description of the concrete uses of a concept will never purport to encompass and exhaust all the uses of some specific concept in language. Conceptual clarification in terms of concrete usage offers a limited perspective, but one that can nonetheless provide clarifications and insights.

Finally, Wittgenstein’s demand to replace the search for abstract meanings in favor of concrete meanings is also methodological-ethical; it urges us, as researchers, to attend and be alert to the different and varied roles that people give their words at a given time. It demands of us to withhold our often-hasty judgments concerning the meanings of words and sentences, and to abandon our preconceptions and be open to new and creative meanings.[[65]](#footnote-66)

In sum, qualitative research that examines the concrete usage of some concept or other in everyday language does not bring us from the everyday concrete level to an abstract metaphysical level. Thus, we remain within the limits of language that Wittgenstein already charted in the *Tractatus*. We do not attempt to go beyond this limit and articulate a scientific theory concerning the meaning of life. Such an inquiry helps us clarify the concept within its circumstances of usage by a given speaker.[[66]](#footnote-67) Nonetheless, this does not amount to giving up on an important and relevant conceptual clarification. On the contrary, it is of great significance that even though the concept “meaning in life” is abstract, complex, and elusive, it has expression in language. Therefore, even if it cannot be subject to empirical scientific investigation, it can be subject to qualitative research that traces the subject’s choices as these are reflected in his linguistic decisions. As Wittgenstein says:

Philosophers very often talk about investigating, analyzing, the meaning of words. But let's not forget that a word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word *really* means. A word has the meaning someone has given to it.[[67]](#footnote-68)

1. **Meaning as Choice – Methodological Application in Ordinary Language**

In the above, I proposed a methodological interpretation of Wittgenstein’s early and late comments on the question of the meaning of life, which we can apply in our investigation of the concept of “meaning in life” and its relevance to (post)modern life. In this section, I will exemplify this methodological tool by analyzing three semi-structured deep interviews with Hebrew-speaking octogenarian Israelis.[[68]](#footnote-69) The interviews were conducted as part of a study that aims to understand how different speakers understand and construct the meaning of their lives.[[69]](#footnote-70) The questions that comprised the interviews were similar; they concerned the ways that the interviewees grasp the meaning of their lives as well as their attitudes toward events, people and other aspects of life they take to be meaningful in their life story.

The assumption is that when a speaker uses language, he makes certain (conscious or unconscious) selections from his linguistic repertoire; the investigation of these choices may expose his modes of understanding and conceptualization.[[70]](#footnote-71) As I cannot here detail the great variety of themes that came up during the interviews, I will present, as an example, one major theme that emerged from the three interviews. This theme captures a common aspect in how the different interviewees grasp the meaning of their lives, which can be generalized through the motto: “Meaning in life as choice.”

The first interviewee (83) lost her son in an IDF operational activity (when he was 28). Her interview began with the question “what is meaningful for you in life?”. The first thing the interviewee said in response is: “What is meaningful for me in life is that it wasn’t simple.” After a few long seconds of silence, she continued: “My starting point is the terrible disaster that befell me.” Though, as an interviewer, I had no prior knowledge of her life story, the interviewee chose to begin with the most significant fact of her life – the loss of her son. This was the starting point of our conversation, but also the starting point of her thoughts about the meaning of her life and about a life worth living.

The decision was to live with dignity, and to be a grandmother as a grandmother ought to be. To continue to host them every Friday, to participate in raising the kids. That was the decision I made, I think, courageously, because it was not easy, and to this day I thank myself for this good choice that I made, because when you stand between life and death and you chose life it is the correct choice […] I felt that in life, the choice between life and death is unequivocal. It isn’t a little bit of life and a little bit of death. If you chose life, then live and respect your life.

The meaning of her life was reflected in her active decision, a decision she can pinpoint in space and time – an existential decision to choose life and to live it fully, that is, to transform it into a meaningful life, despite and in the shadow of the disaster. She describes the trauma of losing her son using the metaphor of an “atom bomb,” one that destroys every part of life and barely leaves the possibility for renewed healthy growth. As she tells it, the mourning and bereavement eliminated any possibility of establishing mental and linguistic meaning. Nonetheless, as she describes the situation, the years have made it possible for her to bring about new growth, as she put it, growth alongside mourning, activity, and productivity alongside pain and bereavement.

This is something that I had no knowledge of. What real mourning, from the gut, amounts to. I wasn’t even able to read the news headlines. I wasn’t able to do anything. I wasn’t able to cook […] I wasn’t able to do any regular daily activity. Everything would go wrong […] It’s as though some kind of scarf envelopes your brain. You can’t speak the right words […]

The upheavals in my life, especially that of the loss of my son, is so dramatic and so overwhelming […] it is not something soft, tender, dreamy. It’s an atom bomb. And yet there is still growth later on. I once said that my heart was cleaved in two. I constantly feel that there are parts within me that are active; they do, they create, they write, and there is a part that is always crying. And this combination of this divided heart, this soul split in two, is me.

The second interviewee (85) spoke of the meaning of his life as a conscious choice to be an observant person of faith, who spends most of his day studying the Bible and the Talmud, in prayer and teaching. This interview also began with a major trauma – namely, his experiences as a young child during the Holocaust and the many family members, including his father, that were lost during that time. Yet the vast majority of the interview revolved around his life today, which, he claims, is full of the joy of learning and of curiosity, which lends his life deep spiritual content, enriches it with meaning, and transforms it into a life “with not one wasted day.”

[…] to feel that life is passing through you, not beside you, I think is a great thing. Many people feel that life passes them by, and I feel that life is passing through me, thanks to the studies […] The Talmud gives me deep inner content.

This interviewee emphasized his conscious decision to live as an observant person. He too can identify a point in his life when he actively chose his attitude toward life after the Holocaust. He describes the way he decides to look at life every day as a miracle – an attitude to which he largely attributes his choosing a life of faith. Additionally, he sees himself as part of something grander – as a part of the Jewish people who survived the Holocaust and who now has the task of attending to the continuity of the Jewish people.

In my opinion, we, as Jews, have a role to play. We have the role of attending to the continuity of the Jewish people […] The meaning of life for me is the continuity of the Jewish people, and I do all that I can so that it carries on […] In my mind, the resurrection of the people of Israel, the resurrection of the State of Israel, is a great miracle […] I cannot imagine my life not in Israel. Cannot imagine.

The third interviewee (85) speaks of the last five years as the most meaningful in her life. Unlike the previous two interviewees, who spent most of the interview speaking about how they imbued their lives with meaning, the third interviewee actually spoke at length of her difficult life, described in “oppressive” terms. At a very young age, her mother died, and she lived under the shadow of a “domineering” father, as she put it, who expected her to bear the burden of raising the other children. In adulthood, she married a husband who she also described as “domineering.” In so doing, she drew a straight line between her childhood under the shadow of her father and her adulthood under the shadow of her husband. She often repeated the sentence “I was missing something” in reference to her life and told of many dreams she had (to enlist in the army, to become a nurse, and more), which she claimed dissolved because of external circumstances or fate. When asked in the interview “what is meaningful to you in life?” she responded:

Bless him, my husband is now in an institution. The significant thing that happened to me is that he got out of the house. Suddenly I felt freer, I did things I have never done, to walk out without asking anyone, to go to the [seniors’] club every day, which he also didn’t allow me. I signed up for many courses, but only went when he was away from home. This is what’s meaningful – what made me an independent woman.

The fact that her husband left the house, upon falling ill with Alzheimer’s and needing to receive treatment at an institution, is described as the key to her freedom to choose. Only in the last few years, when she is no longer bound by the will of others and no longer “dominated,” as she put it, does she feel that her life is full of meaning – in the very fact of her being free to choose as she pleases.

From the three interviews, it thus follows that what makes their lives meaningful is their choice to navigate their lives in their own way and according to their own decisions. Although for the third interviewee freedom of choice was born of necessity, it is what she highlights as the most meaningful in her life. Additionally, in all three interviews it is a salient fact that the linguistic expression of how the speakers grasp the meaning of their lives is formally shaped by drawing a contrast with their past experiences: for the first interviewee it was the choice of life in the face of her son’s death; for the second interviewee it was the choice to take responsibility for the continuity of the Jewish people in the face of the Holocaust; and for the third interviewee it was the very possibility of choice in contrast to the years in which she was “dominated,” as she defines it. In other words, it seems that meaning emerges out of contrast, both in form-structure, that is, in terms of linguistic expression in language, and mentally. The purpose of the contrast established by the interviewees in their narratives is, on the one hand, to emphasize and reinforce the significance of the events they chose to speak about in their interviews, and, at the same time, to sharpen and highlight the role these stories play within their experiences and how significant aspects of their lives were constituted.

To summarize, this paper proposes an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s comments on the question of the meaning of life that can be transformed into a methodological tool that emphasizes inquiry in action, within the limits of the world and language, at a concrete everyday level. The paper shows how using this methodology can expand our knowledge of abstract, vague, and complex concepts, which need not be involved in causal processes. In this case, we examined the different uses of the concept “meaning in life” in everyday language among three octogenarian Hebrew speakers. Of course, the presented conclusion provides only a partial perspective on the concept’s usage. To expand our knowledge concerning the concept of “meaning in life” we must apply the methodological tool with other speakers, of different ages, and in different contexts. Yet I believe that this is the conceptual investigation that is most loyal to Wittgenstein’s thought. Returning to his metaphor of the city, this has been but a short stroll through its streets. To learn more, we must continue walking.

1. This research was supported by The Program for Hermeneutics and Cultural Studies at Bar-Ilan University and is part of a doctoral thesis written within the Program under the supervision of Dr. Dorit Lemberger. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For a review and meta-analysis, see Katarzyna Czekierda, Anna Banik, Crystal L. Park, and Aleksandra Luszczynska, “Meaning in life and physical health: Systematic review and meta-analysis”, *Health Psychology Review*, 11(4) (2017): 387-418, [https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2017.1327325](https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/17437199.2017.1327325). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Irvin David Yalom. *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Michael Eigen. *Psychic Deadness* (London: Routledge, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5.* (Arlington, TX: American Psychiatric Association Publishing). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Viktor Frankl contrasted the will to meaning with Freud’s pleasure principle (will to pleasure) and Adler’s striving to superiority (will to power). Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006 [1946]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. As part of this approach the terms “patient” is strictly avoided, and “client” is used instead. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Louis Hoffman, Mark Yang, Francis J. Kaklauskas, and Albert Chan, *Existential psychology east-west*, Colorado Springs, CO: University of the Rockies Press; Paul T. P. Wong, “Meaning therapy An integrative and positive existential psychotherapy”, *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 40 (2) (2010): 85-93; Emmy Van Deurzen, *Existential counselling & psychotherapy in practice* (2nd ed.). (London: Sage, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Sigmund Freud, “The Meaning of the Symptoms”, in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall (New York: Horace Liveright, 1920), 221-235. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. It is customary to distinguish between Wittgenstein’s early thought as it is expressed in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,whichwas published in 1921, according to which meaning was understood in terms of “truth” and “correspondence,” and his later work, which is reflected most clearly in his *Philosophical Investigations*, which was published in 1953, according to which meaning was understood in terms of use. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden. (New York: Dover, 1998 [1921]), §6.521. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Ibid, §6.42. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Ibid, §6.421. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. The *Tractatus* ends with a single sentence, no. 7, that has no sub-sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Yuval Lurie, *Tracking the meaning of life: a philosophical journey* (Columbia Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Both Freud and Frankl thought that it was useless to speak of the ultimate meaning of life. (Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents,* trans. J. Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961 [1929], 20; Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 114.) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Ibid, §6.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid, §6.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Ibid, §6.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Ibid, §6.32. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Ibid, §6.37. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Ibid, §2.061 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Ibid, §2.062 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Ibid, §5.135 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Ibid, §5.1361 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Ibid, §5.1362 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. “The interpretant” in Peirce's terms (Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, reproducing vol. I-VI, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935; vols. VII-VIII, Arthur W. Burks (ed.) (same publisher, 1958), § 2.228). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Ludwig Wittgenstein, (1965). “A lecture on ethics”, *The philosophical review*, 74 (1), (1965 [1933]), 3-12: 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Kierkegaard framed the question of the meaning of life as the key to human existence and rejected the thought that theoretical, objective, universal, and abstract rationality, which makes no contact with the concrete life of the individual, might guide the subject on how to act in life. (Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling and the sickness unto death* (Princeton University Press), 2013 [1843]; Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,* Vol. 1, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press*,* 1992 [1846]). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. At various point, Wittgenstein testifies to his fondness of Kierkegaard. (Jens Glebe-Møller, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaardiana* 15 (1991), 55-68; Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein. A Memoir* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1958]). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. This may be the reason that Kierkegaard chose to use irony, which is an indirect method of communication. (Shlomi Mualem, “Running up against the Limits of Language: Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard”, *Iyyun:* *The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 54 (2005), 131-148 [Hebrew]) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.63. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.632. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Yuval Lurie, “Wittgenstein on the Meaning of Life”, *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (2000), 115-136 [Hebrew], 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §4.112. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §7. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Ulman-Margalit writes that “we can ask what constitutes a meaningful life even without searching for an answer to the explicit question of what is the meaning of life”. She then notes that, in a different way, members of the Viennese Circle of the 1920s and 1930s redirected the focus of the philosophical-semantic debate from the question of the meaning of a sentence to the question of the difference between a meaningful sentence and a meaningless one. (Edna Ullman-Margalit, “The meaning of life and meaningful life”, in Yeshayahu Tadmor, and Amir Freimann eds., *Education – Core and Essence* (Tel-Aviv: Mofet Institute,2012), 123-132 [Hebrew].) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.341, §6.342, §6.371. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Ibid: 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Lurie, “Wittgenstein on the Meaning of Life”, 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Ibid: 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, §1. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Dorit Lemberger, “Between Theology as Grammar and Religious Point of View in Wittgenstein Philosophy of Religion”, *Iyyun:* *The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 52, 2003: 399-424, 416. [Hebrew] [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. G. Frege, “Sense and Reference”, *The Philosophical Review* 57(3) (1948 [1892]): 209-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §43. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Ibid, §304. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Ibid, §371. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Ibid, §373. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Ibid, §97. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.5563. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §116. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Ibid, §18. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Asher Shkedi, *The Meaning behind the Words: Methodologies of Qualitative Research: Theory and Practice* (Tel-Aviv University, Ramot Press, 2014), 13 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics”, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. T. Sovran, *Language and Meaning: The Birth and Growth of Cognitive Semantics* (Haifa University Press, 2006) [Hebrew], 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §23. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. Sovran, *Language and Meaning*, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. E. Malkiel, An *Analytic Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations §1-§315 by Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2017) [Hebrew], 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. Adi Ofir, “Definition”, *Mafte'akh* 11 (2017), 71-99: 84. [Hebrew] [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. L. Wittgenstein, L. *The Blue and Brown Books*. (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1958), 27-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. The choice to interview speakers over the age of 80 stems from the assumption that this stage in life calls forth growing preoccupation with questions regarding meaning in life that is characterized by retrospective observation, a summary of achievements and failures, and an attempt to establish a “unified self.” (Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (W.W. Norton And Company, 1950.) [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. The interviews were conducted as part of a study in The Program for Hermeneutics and Cultural Studies that received the approval of the ethics committee of Bar-Ilan University (confirmation no.: ISU202010001). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Michael A. K. Halliday, “A brief sketch of systemic grammar”, in Gunther Kress ed., *Halliday: System and Function in Language: Selected Papers* (Oxford University Press, 1976 [1969]), 3-6; Michael A. K. Halliday, “Meaning as choice”, in Lise Fontaine, Tom Bartlett, and Gerard O'Grady eds., *Systemic Functional Linguistics: Exploring Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)