Philosophia (2008) 36:111–128
DOI 10.1007/s11406-007-9076-6

Wittgenstein on Meaning and Life

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Received: 25 December 2006 / Revised: 27 April 2007 / Accepted: 5 June 2007 /
Published online: 23 August 2007

Abstract This is a paper about the way language meshes with life. It focuses on Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work, and compares it with Leo Tolstoy and Saint Augustine's confessions. My aim is to better understand in this way what it means to have meaning in language, as well as meaning in life.

Keywords Life · Language · Wittgenstein · Augustine · Tolstoy

> What is the meaning of life? That was all – a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. Instead there were daily little miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one.
>
> ~Virginia Woolf (1989, 161)

I

Towards the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein distinguishes between two aspects of the world: *how* the world is, and *that* it is. We can talk in language about *how* the world exists. But *that* it exists is not something that we can speak about. *That there is* a world is what he calls "the mystical" (Wittgenstein 1961, §6.44). But in 1929, a decade after the completion of his book, Wittgenstein returns in his "Lecture on Ethics" to this wonder that there is something rather than nothing. Now, he decides to elaborate on his earlier idea by saying that the expression of the wonder at the existence of the world is *the very existence of language*: "The right expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, though it is not any proposition *in* language, is the existence of language itself" (Wittgenstein 1993, 43–4). That *there is* language – this is the proper manifestation for the fact that *there is* a world.

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The sense of this curious remark and its relevance to our investigation seems obscured at first sight. Let me try then to complicate things a little in order to untangle them shortly after. We first asked, "What is the correct expression for the wonder at the existence of the world?" Now, even if we accept the answer given to us by Wittgenstein, the subsequent question must arise: "If the most appropriate expression of wonderment at the existence of the world is the existence of language, what then is the correct expression for the existence of language?" Giorgio Agamben (1993, 9–10), who raises this issue in a rare reference to Wittgenstein's work, replies: "The only possible answer to this question is: human life, as *ethos*, as ethical way."

Agamben's answer is far from being accidental, since it seems to stand in complete accord with various comments made by Wittgenstein around the time he wrote the "Lecture on Ethics." See, for example, the following statement from a text dated from the same period. Here he confronts again the wonder at the existence of the world, only that now the concept of life enters the considerations, as it does in Agamben's analysis:

> What is self-evident, *life*, is supposed to be something accidental, unimportant; by contrast something that normally I never worry my head about is what is real! I.e., what one neither can nor wants to go beyond would not be the world. Again and again there is the attempt to define the world in language, and to display it – but that doesn't work. The self-evidence of the world is expressed in the very fact that language means only it, and can only mean it (Wittgenstein 1993, 193).

A few years later, Wittgenstein returns again to this relationship between language, world, and life. In the middle of a series of notes for his lectures on private experience and sense data from the mid-1930s, he breaks his stream of thought and exclaims: "But aren't you neglecting something – the experience or whatever you might call it. Almost *the world* behind the mere words" (Wittgenstein 1993, 255)? The nature of this negligence, of "that which goes without saying," as he puts it, becomes clear when he suggests: "It seems that I neglect life. But not life physiologically understood but life as consciousness. And consciousness not physiologically understood, or understood from the outside, but consciousness as the very essence of experience, the appearance of the world, the world" (*ibid.*). This last point triggers once again the problem of the expression of the existence of the world: "If I had to add the world to my language it would have to be one sign for the whole of language" (*ibid.*).

Life, Wittgenstein claims, seems to be accidental and unimportant, since it is always self-evident and open to view. As a result, we tend to neglect it. But now we are asked to see that this life, which "goes without saying," is what is really important. He therefore insinuates that "what one neither can nor wants to go beyond would not be the world," but life itself. Of course, this intuition should not surprise you if we recall that in the *Tractatus* he already makes the bold claim that "the world and life are one" (Wittgenstein 1961, §5.621). It is also important to note that this statement is a direct consequence of the realization that "the world is *my* world," which "is manifested in the fact that the limits of the language (*the* language which I understand) mean the limits of *my* world" (Wittgenstein 1961, §5.62). This is the reason why the only expression for the existence of language, though it is nothing that can be said *in* language, is the very existence of life itself. Or, as he puts it in *Philosophical Investigations*, "To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (Wittgenstein

1958, §19). It seems that one way of explaining the development in Wittgenstein's philosophy – this move from what people call the "early" to the "later" Wittgenstein – is to say this: He turns his attention from the correspondence of language to the world, and begins to investigate the way by which "the *speaking* of language is a part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Wittgenstein 1958, §23). Even though this basic intuition is never explicitly developed in the *Investigations*, it seems to inform much of Wittgenstein's later thought. See, for example, the following remark, which appears in yet another text from the early 1930s: "Well, language does connect up with my own life. And what is called 'language' is something made up of heterogonous elements and the way it meshes with life is infinitely various" (Wittgenstein 1974, 66). Wittgenstein will return on numerous occasions to this life behind the mere words. Time and again he treats concepts as having a "home in our life," as being "embedded in life," or as "patterns in the weave of life," and he claims that words have meaning only in "the flux of life," "the bustle of life," or "the stream of life."[1]

II

In the opening scene of the *Blue Book*, which Wittgenstein dictated in the early 1930s, he asks us to imagine a person who is mercilessly reiterating such questions as, "What is the meaning of a word?" or simply, "What is meaning?" He then describes this human condition as some sort of a "mental cramp," in which "we feel that we can't point to anything in reply to [these questions] and yet ought to point to something" (Wittgenstein 1960, 1). In a related passage from the *Investigations*, this mental cramp seems to produce in us the feeling that "*the essence is hidden from us*," which then leads us again to questions such as "What is a proposition?" "What is language?" and to search for answers that will "be given once and for all; and independently of any future experience" (Wittgenstein 1958, §92). I would like to claim that it is exactly this blindness to the way by which language meshes with life that is the cause of this mental cramp. In order to clarify my idea, I will examine such a helpless condition of relentless questioning, where the essence seems to be hidden. But instead of the problem, "What is the meaning of a word?" or "What is language?" in this example we find Leo Tolstoy asking, "What is the meaning of life?"

> And so I lived. But five years ago something very strange began to happen to me. At first I began having moments of bewilderment, when my life would come to a halt, as if I did not know how to live or what to do... Whenever my life came to a halt, the questions would arise: Why? And what next?.. I could breathe, eat, drink, and sleep; indeed, I could not help but breathe, eat, drink, and sleep. But there was

[1] The stream of life: Wittgenstein (1980b, 81, 1967, §173, 1980c, §§504, 687, 1982b, §913, 30). Patterns in the weave of life: Wittgenstein (1967, §568–9, 1958, 174, 229, 1980d, §§672–3, 1982a, §206, 211, 365, 406, 862, b, 67–7, 40, 42). Being embedded in life: Wittgenstein (1980d, Sections 16, 150). The bustle of life: Wittgenstein (1980d, §625–6). The flux of life: Wittgenstein (1982a, §246). Concepts find their home within our life: Wittgenstein (1980d, §186). Read and Guetti (1999) dismiss the importance of life for Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning. They mistakenly claim that the idea of the "stream of life" is Norman Malcolm's, and has no textual evidence in Wittgenstein's manuscripts. They are correct, however, in claiming that the appeal to this stream of life leaves the notion of meaning rather vague. This paper is an attempt to be as concrete as the subject matter permits about the link of meaning to life.

> no life in me... I did not even want to discover truth anymore because I had guessed what it was. The truth was that life is meaningless. (Tolstoy 1983, 26–8)[2]

"A confession," Wittgenstein writes in his notebook, "has to be a part of your new life" (Wittgenstein 1980a, 18). If the quote from Saint Augustine's *Confessions* that opens Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is presented as a particular picture of the essence of human language, then the above quote from Tolstoy's *Confession* may help us to better understand what I take to be a particular picture of the essence of human life that still holds us captivate. It is this: life has a certain meaning; this meaning correlates to a life; it is this meaning for which and according to which we need to live. Notice, however, that Tolstoy does not speak of there being any difference between lives. Since the essence of life is hidden from him, he tries to find an answer that could "be given once and for all; and independently of any future experience." The absence of such an answer leads him to assert the meaninglessness of life – a life that is worthless, aimless, empty, a vanity fair.

Think for a second about the sentence "Life is meaningless" as a picture, in the same way by which Wittgenstein used to think about propositions during the time he wrote the *Tractatus*. Life is meaningless – *this is how things stand*. A question that the later Wittgenstein seems to be posing to his early self will help us understand my attitude towards such an idea: "The picture is *there*; and I do not dispute its *correctness*. But *what* is its application" (Wittgenstein 1958, §424)? In the same way, I do not dispute Tolstoy's claim that life is meaningless, I am not claiming that the picture of life that he presents to us is correct or incorrect, and I am not asking whether this is indeed how things stand. However, Wittgenstein still insists that the *application* of such a proposition must be closely examined. Tolstoy, after all, does describe a life, quite beautifully, in fact. But not everything that we call "life" corresponds to this picture.[3] By itself, the claim that "life is meaningless" simply surrounds the different lives that we see around us "with a haze which makes clear vision impossible."[4] But let us not forget that the claim that "life is meaningless" is taken from a confession – it is an account of a person's *life*. Only within this context of Tolstoy's life as it is depicted in his book, can one begin to understand the meaning, and the application, of his statement. From this perspective, "life is meaningless" may be understood neither as a philosophical claim, nor as a report about a state of affairs, but as a description of a mood, like, "I am anxious," or a call for help, like, "I am in pain."

[2] Caleb Thompson (1997) draws our attention to the connection between Tolstoy's book and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Another extremely helpful account of Wittgenstein's early philosophy of life and its link to Tolstoy can be found in Lurie's (2006) recent monograph, *Tracking the Meaning of life: A Philosophical Journey*. In this paper, however, I try to continue this line of investigation by placing Tolstoy's confession in the seemingly unrelated context of Wittgenstein's later writings. In so doing, my method differs from Lurie's, who states: "As I read Wittgenstein, a philosophical attempt to answer the question about the meaning of life should aim to draw the transcendental limits of life in three contexts of inquiry: logical, epistemic, and ethical;" which leads him to speak of a "mystical experience as substitution for ethics" (*ibid.,* 115, 136–43). I wish to deal here with the question of life without drawing any transcendental limits, and without reverting to the mystical.

[3] "Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system" (Wittgenstein 1958, §3).

[4] "The general notion of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible" (Wittgenstein 1958, §5).

But how does this hopeless condition come about? "In ordinary circumstances," Wittgenstein observes, "these words and this picture have an application with which we are familiar. But if we suppose a case in which this application falls away we become as it were conscious for the first time of the nakedness of the words and the picture" (Wittgenstein 1958, §349). The same situation is apparent when Tolstoy becomes conscious for the first time of the meaninglessness of his life: "I could breathe, eat, drink, and sleep; indeed, I could not help but breathe, eat, drink, and sleep. But there was no life in me." Could it be, then, that Tolstoy lives a life that is separated from its form, a life that is stripped from its meaning, and left in its nakedness? Let me try to illustrate what I see as this possible nakedness of our words, and our lives, through another example. I am writing this paragraph while sitting in the Public Library in New York. I am making a particular *use* of this place – I am working here on my paper. But this is also a favorite spot for tourists. They are taking pictures of the room, of me reading, or of themselves holding a book pretending to be reading. They are looking at the tables, the lamps, and the books with great marvel. Some are even taking the little pencils with which you write your book requests as souvenirs, while others are passing their inquisitive hands over the electricity sockets intended for personal computers. There are even some tourists at the entrance to the library who are acting according to a passage from Wittgenstein's notebooks:

> People who are constantly asking 'why' are like tourists who stand in front of a building reading *Baedeker* [a popular German tourist guide], and are so busy reading the history of its construction, etc., that they are prevented from *seeing* the building. (Wittgenstein 1980a, 40)

Now, I am not trying to claim that Tolstoy is breezing through the question of the meaning of life as a tourist breezes through a handful of monuments in a single day. For Tolstoy, the meaning of life is not an object of curiosity, but the most profound question there is. However, I do want to suggest that despite their sharp difference, the tourists Wittgenstein is talking about have an important affinity to Tolstoy when he writes: "Whenever my life came to a halt, the questions would arise: Why? And what next?" Notice *when* the question 'why' is aroused in him – *when his life comes to a halt*. In this condition, he can no longer *see* the meaning of life. Then Tolstoy seems to ask, "What is life?" as Wittgenstein asks, "What is language?" without resolving this question "once and for all," and without discovering the "hidden essence." Because when you are separated from the ordinary life and the everyday language around you, you act like a tourist, or like a philosopher. In Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, these two characters are closely related, "for philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*" (Wittgenstein 1958, §38). A little later he explains this metaphor by saying that philosophical problems arise "when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work" (Wittgenstein 1958, §132). When we treat language as alienated from its possible use, when we are oblivious to what we can *do* with our words, we lose our sense of direction. We act like those disoriented tourists in the middle of a foreign city: "A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about" (Wittgenstein 1958, §123). The same observation may help us to understand the way by which Tolstoy treats his life in the passage quoted above. When his life comes to a halt, it seems to be "on a

holiday," "like an engine idling." He is unable to see how he is imbedded in the life around him. He does not know his way about. In this condition, the truth is, indeed, that life is meaningless.[5]

It is important to mention that Wittgenstein testifies in his "Lecture on Ethics" that he "cannot help respecting deeply" this hopeless search for the meaning of life, and he avows that he will not, for his life, "ridicule it" (Wittgenstein 1993, 44). It is not unlikely that he was thinking about Tolstoy when he made this comment. It is also important to mention that even though questions like, "What is the meaning of a word?" "What is language?" or "What is meaning?" seem to lead us to a mental cramp, Wittgenstein is not ridiculing these questions nor is he asking us to abandon them. After all, these are the questions that remain at the center of his later philosophy. The answer to our questions concerning language and life would not be found in their disappearance. However, we could still cope with these indispensable problems through a revision of the method by which we deal with them. This has to do with an insight Wittgenstein developed in his transitional period in the late 1920s: "The meaning of a question is the method of answering it...Tell me *how* you are searching, and I will tell you *what* you are searching for" (Wittgenstein 1980b, 66–7). By reconsidering *how* we search for meaning in language and in life, we may also be able to re-evaluate *what* it is exactly that we are searching for.

In order to see how Wittgenstein altered his philosophical search, let me begin in the beginning: "When they [my elders] named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out" (Wittgenstein 1958, §1). In his first reaction to this passage from Augustine's *Confessions*, Wittgenstein transposes this idea to a situation in ordinary life:

> I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked "five red apples." He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked "apples;" then he looks up the word "red" in a table and finds the color sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers – I assume that he knows them by heart – up to the words "five" and for each number he takes an apple of the same color as the sample out of the drawer. – It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. – "But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" – Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. – But what is the meaning of the word "five"? – No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used. (*Ibid.*)

In this spirit, let me try and shift these considerations from Augustine's passage to Tolstoy's. Imagine that after Tolstoy finished writing about the meaninglessness of life, his wife entered the room, and asked the great novelist to go to the market and

[5] An aspect of language and life that I am unable to fully develop in this paper is the idea that they are both *shared*. In the same way that Wittgenstein finds it nonsensical to imagine a private language, I find it extremely problematic to imagine a truly private form of life. In the same way that a meaningful language is not merely the consequence of *my belief* that I make sense, a meaningful life is not simply a subjective decision (it is not enough for Sisyphus to *think* that his life is meaningful). As Wittgenstein puts it, human beings "agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions, but in form of life" (Wittgenstein 1958, §241).

buy five red apples. So he wrote on a slip of paper, "Five red apples," and put it in his pocket. What, then, is the relationship between the Tolstoy who wrote, "Life is meaningless," and the Tolstoy who wrote, "Five red apples"? Does the first Tolstoy somehow *correspond* to the second Tolstoy? Can the passage in which he maintains that life is meaningless *explain* the sense, or senselessness, of the little note he wrote afterwards, and his subsequent trip to the market? If one thinks that life is meaningless, does it necessarily entail that writing the note and getting the apples from the market are meaningless activities? But the note that says, "Five red apples" has a very simple use: Leo's wife wanted him to get some apples, he wrote the note so he would not forget, and he read it the next morning in the marketplace, where he purchased those five red apples, which his wife used later on in order to make the pie that the couple enjoyed after dinner. It is in this and similar ways that one lives his or her life. But why should one bother about dessert if life is meaningless? Well, I can assume that Tolstoy simply *acted* as his wife asked him to act. In life, explanations come to an end somewhere, especially when your wife is involved. Imagine how Tolstoy's wife would react if Leo refused to get the apples "because life is meaningless." Or imagine that Tolstoy returned from the market with five rotten apples. "I am really sorry," he told his wife, "I must have been contemplating the meaning of life while I picked them out." But if Tolstoy can still eat the apple pie (as he can still drink, breathe, and sleep), yet "there is no life" in him, is it to say that he is some kind of a lifeless eating machine? Does "life" or "the meaning of life" need to be understood as an "extra something" that we obtain on top of the mere fact of being alive? But again, what is the *meaning* of eating an apple pie? Well, such a thing was not in question here, but only the place of this and other activities within the weave of a person's life.

III

A crucial aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophical method, both early and late, is "to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense" (Wittgenstein 1958, §464). In *On Certainty*, he uses this method in order to examine G. E. Moore's refutation of philosophical skepticism concerning the existence of an external world. Standing in a well-lit classroom, Moore raises his hand and says, "I know that this is a hand." According to Moore (1959), this is a proof for the existence of at least one external object (his hand), and so it is a simple refutation of skepticism. In his visit to Ithaca, New York, Wittgenstein had important discussions with Norman Malcolm about Moore's "proof." One of Wittgenstein's ideas that stayed in Malcolm (1970, 93) memory was that "an expression has meaning only in the stream of life." In other words, we must see how a proposition like "I know that this is a hand" could be imbedded in our everyday life. We need to ask when, in ordinary life, are we actually inclined to say, "I know such and such," let alone, "I know that this is a hand"? Wittgenstein believes that the answer is: rarely, if at all (Wittgenstein 1979b, §§11, 413). And even if we insist on imagining a strange situation in which a claim like "I know that this is a hand" is indeed "a move in one of our language-games," this proposition will then lose "everything that is philosophically astonishing" about it (Wittgenstein 1979b, §622). At best, "I know that this is a hand" can only be a regular proposition in ordinary language. But it cannot function as a "philosophical proof" of something like the existence of the external world.

This approach may also help us to reëvaluate Tolstoy's claim that "life is meaningless." Again, as a description of a stage in one's life, there is a great validity, even urgency, to his words. In this light, it is indeed a move in a language-game, and a pattern in the weave of Tolstoy's life. Many of us have moments of disorientation in life, some are more profound and some are momentary. When you feel that you do not know your way about in the stream of life, telling someone you trust that "life is meaningless" is somewhat similar to asking for directions in a foreign city. Seen from this perspective, however, Tolstoy's claim tends to lose "everything that is philosophically astonishing" about it. Think also about Augustine's account of the way by which he learned to use language as a child. It is not "philosophically astonishing" when you read it in the context of the *Confessions*, instead of as the opening scene of *Philosophical Investigations*. In fact, neither Augustine nor Tolstoy present these episodes from their own lives as particular pictures of the essence of human language, or of the essence of human life. It is the author of the *Investigations*, and the author of this paper, who are responsible for this interpolation, or "philosophication" of Augustine and Tolstoy's confessions.[6]

I also need to note that Wittgenstein's aim in *On Certainty* is neither to dismiss the skepticism concerning the existence of the external world, nor to affirm it. From the time of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein's position on this matter was very clear: "Skepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked" (Wittgenstein 1961, §6.51). In *On Certainty*, you can see the other side of the same coin: the refutation of skepticism, exactly like skepticism itself, is obviously nonsensical, because it tries to assert certainty where no answer can be given. If the question disappears then the answer must vanish as well. Yet it took Wittgenstein three decades before he could explain his basic intuition by passing both the assertion and the refutation of skepticism from their position as disguised nonsense to a patent nonsense. In this spirit, I would like to say that the aim in this paper, despite how the above considerations may appear, is neither to take lightly Tolstoy's skepticism concerning the existence of a meaningful life, nor to make the opposite claim that the truth is that life is meaningful after all. We do not advance theses, or antitheses, in the philosophy of life. My only claim is that when you remove the question of meaning from the flux of life and place it in a kind of a "philosophical holiday," you may think that you make sense, but in fact you do not. To paraphrase Frege's (1980, x) dictum – "Never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition" – I could say: Never look for meaning in isolation, but only in the context of a life.

Nevertheless, one can argue that there is something very rigid, almost intolerant, about Wittgenstein's position. It seems that a proposition like, "I know that this is a

[6] To speak about "philosophy" or what is "philosophically astonishing" in this context is to speak about the metaphysical temptation that Wittgenstein tries to resist in his view of language, and I try to resist in my view of life, since this temptation lacks not only "philosophical significance," but, plain and simple, any sense whatsoever. On this matter, see Cavell's (1995) "Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*." Nevertheless, Thompson (2000) reads Wittgenstein's entire *Investigations* as nothing but a sort of a philosophical confession in its own right. I like this suggestion, because it allows one to see that "working in philosophy" is not metaphysical work, but an ethical work, in the sense that it is always, as Wittgenstein writes, "a working on yourself" (Wittgenstein 1980a, 16).

hand" makes perfect sense, since we can easily understand it, and Moore certainly knew what he meant when he uttered it. Moreover, this proposition seems to be "flamingly *obvious*," because it will be rather hopeless to try and doubt such a statement (Cavell 1979, 211). We are therefore tempted to believe that a proposition has two kinds of meanings: as if a sentence could still make sense and be true even though we are not sure about its application; as if a sentence has a "truth value" on the one hand, and then also a "use value" on top of it. Wittgenstein, however, shows us that the "meaning" of a proposition does not reside within the speaker, within the listener, within the proposition itself, or in some realm beyond the proposition. The meaning of the proposition arises only from the context in which it is used. Outside its application in a language-game, separated from its place within a form of life, a proposition simply lacks sense. Full stop. As James Conant (1998) explains, the fact that a proposition *by itself* still *seems* to make sense is merely an appearance, or a phantasm; it is simply this "old misunderstanding" about what it means to mean that Wittgenstein intends to cure us from (cf. Crary 2007).

But there is another side to Wittgenstein's resolute view of meaning, which is even more counterintuitive than the first one. In the same way that we could be tempted to believe that a sentence makes sense where in fact it is nonsensical, we could also be tempted to believe that a proposition is nonsensical where in fact it is not. He illustrates this curious phenomenon with the following example:

> When I say that the orders "Bring me sugar" and "Bring me milk" make sense, but not the combination "Milk me sugar," that does not mean that the utterance of this combination of words has no effect. And if the effect is that the other person stares at me and gapes, I don't on that account call it the order to stare and gape, even if that was precisely the effect that I wanted to produce. (Wittgenstein 1958, §493)

There are a few things that you can milk, like cows, but sugar is definitely not one of them, while there are a few things that you can do with sugar, like pouring it, but you cannot milk it. However, such a "combination of words" can still have a place in our language, and an effect on our lives. Which is not to say that "Milk me sugar" is a sort of an "effective nonsense," in opposition to some kind of "ineffective nonsense." There are no different kinds of nonsense. If Wittgenstein achieves the effect that he wanted to produce by saying, "Milk me sugar," then it is simply no longer the nonsense that we took it to be. If by evoking a stanza from a poem I produce a certain effect, then any attempt to argue for the nonsensicality of the poetic expression is in itself plain nonsense. It all depends on the context of our words, but not only within a proposition, as Frege claims. It depends on the context of the proposition itself within a situation, within a language-game, and within a form of life, in which this proposition finds its home. If, in the course of a surgery, the doctor will say, "Bring me sugar," the nurse will probably stare at the surgeon and gape in the same manner that Wittgenstein's dinner companion stared at the philosopher and gaped when he told him, "Milk me sugar."

In these and similar cases, "when language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meaning of words change" (Wittgenstein 1979b, §65). Such conceptual turns, however, are not restricted to the realm of

language, since language is imbedded in our very lives: "What is called an alteration in concepts is of course not merely an alteration in what one says, but also in what one does" (Wittgenstein 1980c, §910). But then, we must also realize that even "what one does" never exists in isolation:

> How could human behavior be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what *one* man is doing *now*, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action. (Wittgenstein 1967, §567)

We can therefore uncover the meaning of a particular aspect of our existence within the stream of life that it is a part of. We may also search for our place among the multiplicity of lives that surrounds us. And we can even question or criticize or judge certain elements as long as we pay close attention to their place within the hurly-burly of life. This method will not reveal some sort of an essence still hidden from us. It will not lead to the answer that will be given once and for all. However, as Wittgenstein's approach enables him to present a new vision of language, it may also help us to begin to think anew about this life. Does it at all make sense to speak about "*the* meaning of language," or only about "meaning *in* language"? Wittgenstein's *Investigations* helps us to see the emptiness of the former and the labor required in order to reveal the latter. So I think that I have reached a moment in which I should admit that though we are not going to find *the* meaning of life, we could certainly find meaning *in* life. Which is not to say that "the meaning of life" remains as an ineffable mystery. The absolute meaning of life is not "something" of which we cannot speak. It is simply what we need to learn to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.

IV

"Our problems," Wittgenstein admits in the *Tractatus*, "are not abstract, but perhaps the most concrete that there are" (Wittgenstein 1961, §5.5563). In the *Investigations* he adds, "We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm" (Wittgenstein 1958, §108). We are dealing, if you like, with the actual uses, and occasional misuses, of our words. This method is not based on asking *what* the meaning of a word is, but on our ability to see "how the words in question *are actually used in our language*" (Wittgenstein 1960, 56). "Have the use *TEACH* you the meaning," he demands (Wittgenstein 1980c, §1013). In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein goes as far as saying: "For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined as this: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1958, §43). However, we should not be tempted to reduce this idea to a theory, or a thesis. We need to beware of "the dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy" (Wittgenstein 1958, §131). Let me, then, try to explain how the dogma of "meaning as use" could be understood within the context of our considerations.

Use, *Gebrauch*, could also mean practice or exercise. To speak about the "use in the language" may therefore direct us back to the 23rd remark in the *Investigations*: "The *speaking* of language is a part of an activity, or of a form of life." Language, *Sprache,* is a speaking, a *Sprechen.* What is at stake is not language as such, but the *use* of language. This use, this speaking, is neither a state nor a possession, but an *activity.* While in the early philosophy language was taken to be a mirror of reality, now it becomes clear that our words can no longer function as innocent bystanders that take a picture of the world. After all, "Words are also deeds" (Wittgenstein 1958, §546). If the whole world is a stage, then language is a player *on* this stage, and not merely a spectator: "It is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (Wittgenstein 1979b, §204). The linguistic activity does not exist in a void, but always within the space and time of our lives: "The *speaking* of language," let us remember, is not the whole activity, but only "a part of an activity," and this larger activity is nothing more, and nothing less, than what Wittgenstein calls "form of life." Despite its centrality to the *Investigations*, language is far from being everything that is the case. In other words, thinking about the idea that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language," without taking into consideration the way by which this use is weaved into our lives, misses an extremely important point. Wittgenstein was well aware of this possible misinterpretation from one of the first formulations of his later philosophy:

> Do I *understand* the word just by describing its application? Do I understand its point? Haven't I deluded myself about something important? At present, say, I know only how men use this word. But it might be a game, or a form of etiquette. I do not know why they behave in this way, how *language* meshes with their life. Is meaning then really only the use of a word? Isn't it the way this use meshes with our life? But isn't its use a part of our life? (Wittgenstein 1974, 65)

However, if it is true that the use of language must be a part of our life, the following question arises: What is this ephemeral entity that I call here, interchangeably, "life," "the mesh of life," "the stream of life," "the weave of life," and, ultimately, "the form of life"? One way of explaining what Wittgenstein means by all these expressions is to return to an early remark from a notebook he wrote during World War I, in which he claims that one is "fulfilling the purpose of existence" when one "no longer needs to have any purpose except to live" (Wittgenstein 1979a, 73). Notice how this early attitude towards life goes along the lines of his later attitude towards language. Life, like language, is not an abstract or theoretical phenomenon, but the most concrete thing there is. We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of life, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm. A form of life is neither a possession nor a state but, indeed, an *activity* – a *vita activa*. *Living*, which the young Wittgenstein takes to be the only fulfillment of the purpose of existence, seems to have a secret affinity with what he will later call *speaking*: the *speaking* of language, the *living* of life. (In German it sounds better: "Das *Sprechen* der Sprache, das *Leben* des Lebens.") In the end, it is our *acting* that lies at the bottom of a form of life. A form of life is what we participate in, not what we correspond to. We can therefore see now how our understanding of a *form of life* is incomplete before we consider also what I would

like to call the *life of form*. If a life has a form, then this form must have a life. A form of life is neither static nor eternal; a form of life is a stream of life. What gives a form its life is the way by which we use its powers, practice its possibilities, and exercise its potentialities. If forms are not *lived*, they can simply become obsolete and get forgotten, like language-games; they become meaningless, or dead.

"We don't want to say that meaning is a special experience, but that it isn't anything which happens, or happens to us, but something that we do, otherwise it would be just dead" (Wittgenstein 1974, 156). So maybe, one will suggest, Tolstoy thought that life is meaningless because he expected to find a special experience of meaning? But meaning, Wittgenstein explains to us, is not something that happens to us, but simply what we do: writing that life is meaningless, going to the market to buy some apples, preparing a pie and eating it, talking about your day, praying, feeling pain, hoping – all those patterns in the weave of our life. The meaning of any of those patterns, like the meaning of any word that we use in our language, is not something extraordinary, something "extra" on top of ordinary life or everyday language. It is simply what we do – we speak, we live. How we speak and how we live is what gives language and life their meaning.[7]

Wittgenstein helps us to see that there is nothing sacred, sublime, mysterious, or occult about the meaning of our words. "When I think in language, there aren't 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought" (Wittgenstein 1958, §329). When the linguistic engine is idling, our words are a vehicle of nonsense, of idle talk; but the very same engine could also become the vehicle of meaningful thought. "Meaning," however, is not the fuel of the engine, nor the destination of the vehicle, but the very movement,

[7] But here one is tempted to ask: "So what if this is what I do. I demand to know *why* I do it." In such a case, Wittgenstein suggests, "it would now be no use to say: "But can't you see...?" – and repeat the old examples and explanations" (Wittgenstein 1958, §185). From the first remark of the *Investigations*, his reaction to one's temptation to offer more and more reasons is simple and unequivocal: "Explanations come to an end somewhere" (Wittgenstein 1958, §1). There are times, he insists, when the best reply to repeated questions about the way we speak, or the way we live, may not be further explanations. In a definitive formulation, he states: "If I have exhausted my justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do"" (Wittgenstein 1958, §217). Confronting this inability to fully justify and explain neither language nor life might lead you therefore to be skeptical about the language that you speak and doubt this whole life that you live, since *nothing* that you say or do can be absolutely and firmly grounded. But you also need to realize that "doubting," exactly like reasoning, "has to come to an end somewhere" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 377). When you come to think about it, "a doubt without an end is not even a doubt," but a sort of a "hollow" doubt (Wittgenstein 1979b, §§312, 625). Every doubt must be, "*essentially*, an exception to the rule," since it has to find its place within the "environment" of the rule (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 379). For example, a game does not *begin* when the players doubt its rules. Doubt may appear only after the environment of the rules of the game has been established (cf. Wittgenstein 1993, p. 381). Accordingly, Wittgenstein can claim that "the primitive form of the language-game is certainty, not uncertainty. For uncertainty could never lead to action" (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 397). In this way, instead of a skeptical attitude of doubt, Wittgenstein promotes what I take to be a gesture of acceptance. The sense of deep skepticism about the meaning of life is never the beginning of the story, and hopefully it is not its end (suicide). If you insist on being skeptical about what you do, then what you do, and your doubt concerning what you do, must be closely related to "what has to be accepted, the given," which Wittgenstein calls "*forms of life*" (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 226). Otherwise, how could I even make sense of your doubts?

work, or activity, while the engine is in gear. In this way, meaning is taken by Wittgenstein to be *inseparable* from language:

> You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow that you can buy with it. (But contrast: money, and its use.) (Wittgenstein 1958, §120)

Notice that Wittgenstein is not disagreeing with his imaginary interlocutor: indeed, what is important is not the word, but its meaning. What he contests is the idea that meaning could be seen as separate from the word itself: "Here the word, there the meaning." To ask for the meaning of a word is like asking for the value of a hundred dollar bill. Yes, I might use this money in order to buy a cow, but this is not to say that the cow somehow corresponds to my money. It is very interesting to find in an earlier version of this remark the following list of a few of the things that we can use our money for: "Sometimes a material object, sometimes the right to a seat in the theatre, or a title, or fast travel, or life, etc." (Wittgenstein 1974, 63).[8] In the same manner, we no longer think that "meaning" is something that correlates to a word: the concept "cow" and the actual cow that you can denote with it. In the same way that there is a multiplicity of things that I can use my money for, there are always different things that I can do with a word: sometimes I call "cow" while pointing to it in order to teach my child the meaning of this word; sometimes I shout "cow" when driving with my wife in a car and suddenly I see a cow in the middle of the road; sometimes I say "cow" when the counterperson at the deli asks me whether I would like to buy cheese made from goat's milk or cow's milk; sometimes I whisper "cow" to a friend in a party while we glance at a person who is devouring all the *hors d'oeuvre*, etc. Even though these examples seem to be so insignificant and mundane, or even profane, the meaning of the word "cow" cannot be separated from this multiplicity of possible uses.[9]

Tolstoy seems to claim: the point isn't life, but its meaning. And this is true. But can this meaning exist apart from living itself? Here a life, there a meaning? Wittgenstein shows us an alternative way of looking at this issue. When I live my life, there are no 'meanings' that accompany my activities, like halos, or shadows. The meaning of life is not going through my mind in addition to living itself. Living is itself the vehicle of the thought of life. While "philosophers very often talk about investigating, analyzing, the meaning of words," Wittgenstein tries to make sure that we will "not forget that a word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a

[8] Wittgenstein could not have known at the time he wrote this sentence that, a few years later, his extremely affluent family would dispense much of its fortune in order to be saved from the claws of the Nazis.

[9] Karl Marx's depiction of the shift from use value to exchange value, and the creation of what he calls "the fetishism of commodity," may be connected to Wittgenstein's comment about the cow, the money, and its use. From this perspective, Wittgenstein's project can be seen as an attempt to fight against the "fetishistic" character of our language, or our "bewitchment" by our words, which leads us to consider meaning as a mysterious phenomena, and to separate our words from their simple use value (cf. Wittgenstein 1967, §690). Could this be "the most consequential" influence of Piero Sraffa, the Marxist economist, on Wittgenstein's thought (cf. *PI*, Preface)? For more on this topic, see Read's (2000)"Wittgenstein and Marx on Philosophical Language."

power independent of us" (Wittgenstein 1960, 27–8). It is us, those who speak, who give our language its meaning. And it is us, those who live, who make this life a meaningful experience. Meaning dwells in the midst of our life.

V

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein asserts that a picture "is laid against reality like a scale [maβstab]" (Wittgenstein 1961, §2.1512). In the *Investigations*, he realizes that this simile does not explain anything, but is in itself in need of explanation:

> Put a ruler [maβstab] against this body; it does not say that the body is of such-and-such a length. Rather is it in itself – I should like to say – dead, and achieves nothing of what thought achieves." – It is as if we had imagined that the essential thing about a living man was the outward form. Then we made a lump of wood in that form, and were abashed to see the stupid block, which hadn't even any similarity to a living being. (Wittgenstein 1958, §430)

There is something missing from the relationship between language and reality. The fact that a proposition and a fact share a logical form is not the end of the story. The form of language is like an effigy that has the outward form of a man, but it still lacks the spark of life. As a result, the logical form achieves nothing but a *dead correspondence*. This should not lead us, however, to the nihilistic claim that language is separated from reality, that we cannot mean with our words things in the world. This is not what Wittgenstein says. But he still insists that we need to reconsider what it means to mean: "When we mean something, it's like going up to someone, it's not having a dead picture (of any kind). We go up to the thing we mean" (Wittgenstein 1958, §455). To mean something, to reach out to it, is like, I want to say, *touching* it. But touching is something that only a living being can do. A living being can touch another living being, or even something that is not alive, like a stone; but even if a stone is placed on top of another stone, it is not, properly speaking, "touching" it.[10] Hence, in order for our words to be like a "picture that touches reality," language must be, in some sense, *alive* (Wittgenstein 1961, §2.1515). If a sign is not alive, it cannot *signify*. This "aliveness" is a key that can help us to unlock Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning.

"Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? – In use it is *alive*. Is life breathed into it there? – Or is the *use* its life" (Wittgenstein 1958, §432)? This remark, by itself, seems rather peculiar. But when we compare it with its numerous variations in the preliminary manuscripts that led to the composition of the *Investigations*, it becomes alive, and meaningful. In an early draft we find Wittgenstein contemplating Frege's idea that a sentence is the expression of a thought. "In every case," he remarks, "what is meant by 'thought' is the *living* element in the sentence, without which it is dead, a mere succession of sounds or series of written shapes" (Wittgenstein 1974, 107). In a second text, he explains the nature of this living element: "But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*" (Wittgenstein 1960, 4). These

[10] In *De anima*, Aristotle (1987, 413b3–7) makes a very similar point about the nature of touch.

considerations lead to the claim that our signs are, in a sense, arbitrary: "The words used don't matter, of course; they could be 'X' and 'Z,'. But what must we do with the words to give them some sort of life? We must explain them, *use* them" (Wittgenstein 1993, 362–3). This use, Wittgenstein further clarifies, cannot take place in a void, but always within a context: "We thus would have invented a surrounding for the word, a game in which its use is a move. It does not matter whether in practice the word has a place in a game, but what matters is that we have a game, that a life is given to it" (Wittgenstein 1979c, 124). "Only in the system," he can therefore conclude, "has the sign any life" (Wittgenstein 1967, §146). A close examination of these remarks in conjunction with the idea that "the meaning of a word is its use in our language" reveals a curious fact. *For Wittgenstein, to say that a sign is alive and to say that it is meaningful amounts to the same thing. The meaning of a sign is its life, and the life of a sign is its meaning. The words 'life' and 'meaning', 'alive' and 'meaningful', are used interchangeably.*

But if life and meaning are one, then "the meaning of life" could be reduced to the seemingly redundant expression, "the life of life." In his *Confessions*, we can find Augustine searching for exactly this "life of life," *vitae vita*.[11] However, in this expression the first life and the second life are not the same. The second life, *vita*, signifies for Augustine something like the mere fact of being alive, which animals and humans share with each other. On the other hand, the first life, *vitae*, is something completely different. This is the true, eternal, and happy life. It is this second use of the word "life" that stands at the center of Augustine's quest in his *Confessions*. Because even though he is factually alive, this life is still a certain kind of a "living death" for him. It is not in mere life, but in the life of life, that he finds redemption.[12]

In a similar manner, Tolstoy cannot help but breathe, eat, drink, and sleep, but there is still no *life* in him. Such a lifeless or meaningless life, I would like to suggest, is not unlike a senseless proposition. In the same way that Augustine and Tolstoy show us the possibility that a life that seems be alive may be in fact rather dead and meaningless, Wittgenstein never tired from showing us how the sign, which seems to have a life, can also be a sign of death, and how a proposition that seems to have sense, might be nothing but nonsense in disguise. But this, as we have seen, is only one side of the story. We also need to note that in the course of their confessions, Augustine and Tolstoy eventually realize that their seemingly empty existence could actually be full of meaning, or full with life. In the same manner, Wittgenstein also shows us how we can still use a proposition that at first glance seems to be nonsensical, and how a sign that looks dead can actually come to life. Because the life of a signs is a sign of life.

What, then, gives life to our language? And what gives meaning to our life? Could it be a gift bestowed from above? Is there a divine entity that "breathed life"

[11] "...I tell you [my soul] that you are already superior. For you animate the mass of your body and provide it with life, since no body is capable of doing that for another body. But your God is for you the life of your life [*vitae vita*]" (Augustine 1998, Book 10, §6).

[12] Compare with the following quotes from Augustine's *Confessions*: "What Lord, do I wish to say except that I do not know whence I came to be in this mortal life or, as I may call it, this living death?" (Book 1, §6); "That was my kind of life. Surely, my God, it was no real life at all?" (Book 3, §2); "What could all this matter to me, true life, my God?" (Book 1, §17); "When I seek for you, my God, my quest is for the happy life. I will seek you that 'my soul may live'" (Book 10, §20); "May I not be my own life. On my own resources I lived evilly. To myself I was death. In you I am recovering life" (Book 12, §10).

into our signs, and our bodies? Wittgenstein, a dedicated reader of Augustine and Tolstoy, and a deeply religious person who once wrote that "the meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God," could easily leave it at that (Wittgenstein 1979a, 73).[13] Instead, his philosophy offers a new way of thinking about this old problem. If a sign is not isolated, but used within a context, then it is alive. And if it is alive, then it is meaningful. In a similar way, we can now see that when the *living* of life is a part of an activity, or of a form of life, then the *meaning* of such a life is at hand.[14]

[13] I believe that the observation that every problem in Wittgenstein's philosophy can be seen "from a religious point of view" (as Wittgenstein himself once suggested), may lead to very fruitful insights by applying it to the question of the meaning of life. Nevertheless, this approach should be qualified right away in order to avoid misunderstandings. First, it is important to realize that a philosophy seen from a religious point of view is not a religion seen from a philosophical point of view. You need to clarify Wittgenstein's philosophical project by attending to his religious sensibility, and not the other way around. "Theology as grammar" – this is how he puts it in the *Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1958, §373). In this respect, theology is not the subject matter of his philosophical work, but, in some sense, the grammar of his work. Second, one must understand that Wittgenstein's religious sensibility is radically different from the set of beliefs that we are familiar with from institutional religion. For this reason, any attempt to look at Wittgenstein's philosophy from a religious point of view must search for *Wittgenstein's* religious point of view. You will therefore do best if you avert from traditional theological categories, and focus only on the few unique remarks Wittgenstein makes about this sensitive and decisive subject in his own writings. Malcolm's (1994) posthumous monograph, *Wittgenstein: a Religious Point of View*, though it is the best attempt so far to pursue this line of investigation, still tends to give in to the double temptation indicated above (on this matter, see Peter Winch's response to Malcolm at the end of the latter's book). I think that a good starting point for any account of Wittgenstein's religious point of view is his idea "that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living [*Art des Lebens*], or a way of assessing life" (Wittgenstein 1980a, 64).

[14] Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that Wittgenstein is not simply rejecting in his later philosophy Augustine and Tolstoy's link between God, meaning, and life. Yet it is crucial to recognize that "God" is for them not an entity that lies *beyond* life, bestowing on it absolute sense and invariant moral norms from above. As Wittgenstein shows in his "Lecture on Ethics," such a metaphysical God, in its "absolute sense," is simply nonsensical (Wittgenstein 1993, 42–3). For Augustine, as for Wittgenstein, "God" may be conceived as a sign that is used in a completely different way. God *is* the life of life; God *is* the happiness and truth that can be found in life, and vice versa. As much as this is a way to think about life, it is also a radical way to think about God. In Tolstoy, this unique approach to the notion of God becomes even more apparent, since his discovery of meaning arises from his appreciation of the ordinary life in his village, of the everyday activity of the peasants around him. At the end of his confession, Tolstoy meshes with the form of life around him, and not with some sort of a mystical divinity. He could therefore claim that his faith in God has nothing to do with the blind acceptance of a doctrine or a dogma, because "faith" is for him nothing more, but nothing less, than "the knowledge of the meaning of human life," as it manifests itself in the actions of daily existence (Tolstoy 1983, 61). In short, he brings God back from its metaphysical position to its home in the everyday. He can therefore crystallize this crucial idea in a definitive formulation: "To know God and to live come to one and the same thing. God is life" (*ibid*., 74).

John Cottingham and David Cooper recently offered two seemingly related replies to the question of life's meaning. Cottingham (2003, 99) states: "The domain that 'cannot be spoken of' must be *handled through praxis* – the practice of spirituality." And Cooper (2005, 127) affirms: "Human existence is meaningful only if it is 'answerable' to something 'beyond the human'. Those last four words will later be taken as indicating what is beyond conceptualization and articulation: the ineffable or mysterious, in effect." I hope that it is clear that this paper was an attempt to develop an alternative to such a view, and my mentioning of "God" in this final footnote is not an attempt to return to the ineffable, mysterious, or spiritual (at least not in the way Cottingham and Cooper present them). In fact, I am not sure how to orient my excursus on Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to the recent Renaissance in the question of the meaning of life among analytic philosophers. Thaddeus Metz (2007) wrote a very helpful survey of this debate, which bears a rather amusing title: "New Developments in the Meaning of Life." Metz divides the field between supernaturalist answers to the question of life's meaning (which can be either God-centered or soul-centered) and naturalist answers (which may be either subjectivist or objectivist). To be clear, this paper fits into neither of these categories.

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