

Review of Steven Cassedy, *What Do We Mean When We Talk about Meaning*
(Oxford University Press, 2022)

Jacob Rump, Creighton University

Forthcoming in *Phenomenological Reviews*. Please cite only from the published version.

As Steven Cassedy notes in the introduction to this fascinating, wide-ranging, and unique book, meaning is everywhere, and yet it seems no one ever stops to define it (1)¹. Through a series of chapters tracing the history of “meaning” from ancient Greek and Hebrew sources to contemporary English usage, Cassedy tells a story in which notions of meaning were originally limited to words, signs, and interpretation, but usage gradually expanded to a present-day context in which meaning means... well... almost everything. The book succeeds in something that, in my view, is not often enough done in contemporary philosophy or intellectual history: connecting past philosophical ideas—in broad, easy-to-understand brushstrokes—to popular culture and the popular uptake of those ideas in the present and recent past.

The book is, indeed, more appropriately considered a work in intellectual history than in philosophy in a narrow academic sense. Cassedy works in comparative literature, and the primary method of the work is close reading rather than philosophical argument. His overarching claims are developed via helpful etymological discussions and readings of texts in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Russian, French, German, and Danish, as well as selective attention to secondary literature on these figures and associated key texts. These treatments, taken as a whole, offer an extremely helpful overview of the evolution of the notion of meaning over the *longue durée* of Western intellectual history, with some fascinating (if necessarily selective) detailed accounts of key ideas and authors.

I begin with a chapter-by-chapter overview of the more broadly historical Chapters One through Five, then turn to more detailed critical treatment of some major themes, where I also survey Chapters Six through Nine, which are devoted to more recent and popular treatments of meaning.

I.

The concept of meaning as we have come to know it in contemporary English is more recent than we might expect, and does not, on Cassedy’s reading, have an exact equivalent in ancient writings. Chapter One, as its title suggests, argues that the ancient world “got along without” meaning “until the rise of Christianity.” Cassedy surveys Hebrew and Aramaic terms appearing in the Hebrew Bible and concludes that there is simply no word corresponding to our “meaning” to be found there, though there is some interesting discussion of *translations* of Ecclesiastes using “meaning” in an attempt to get at the sense of value or “meaning in life” that Cassedy is interested in (14-15).

Cassedy then turns to ancient Greece, where he finds significant semantic commonality with regard to the English verb *to mean*, and ample evidence of diverse theories of signification,

¹ All parenthetical citations are to the reviewed text unless otherwise noted.

signs, interpretation, and the function of language in authors like Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, and as far back as Heraclitan fragments about the Delphic Oracle. But the focus remains on the *verb*, and on the notion of signification: Cassedy finds little evidence of a noun form of “meaning,” and little attention paid to the “something that gets signified” corresponding to a sign (19). Cassedy also insists, with regard to Platonic forms (*ideai*) that “nowhere are they likened to a *meaning* that we retrieve as we do from words in a written text” (23).

It is only in Chapter Two, with Latin-language authors of early Christianity, that we “first find *meaning* used as the object of a metaphysical interpretive quest into a mysterious, invisible realm separate from the realm of direct experience” and where the meaning of “meaning” begins to expand beyond the literal. The key notion here is “the readability the world,” and Cassedy largely follows the work of Hans Blumenberg and New Testament scholar Harry Gamble in his extended analysis of meaning in Augustine. Here, helpfully, we find an early touchstone for the distinction between natural and conventional (“given”) signs (30)—a distinction that would be important in twentieth-century accounts from Husserl (2001, I.§2) to Grice (1957, 378-79). Divine scripture for Augustine consists of given signs with authorial intent, but the interpretation of those signs involves usage of “ideas/thoughts/meanings (*sensa*) by means of signs, and those signs relate to our various senses (*sensūs*)” (31). This anticipates the idea—central to Cassedy’s interpretation of the German *Sinn* as discussed below—of a close relationship and intermingling between meaning and sensation. It also introduces the important distinction, central to Augustine, on Cassedy’s interpretation, between the actual reading of books, such as the scriptures, and the figurative “reading” of the world or nature, and ultimately of heaven, whose signs are—at least for human beings—“shrouded in mystery and subject to interpretive acts that can never be guaranteed to reveal an absolute truth” (33). This for Cassedy is the central step that clears the way for the contemporary usage of meaning in phrases like “meaning in life.”

Cassedy then notes a shift from the medieval idea of reading the “text of the world” as well as written passages to the later idea—which Cassedy argues, following the historian of science Peter Harrison, arises as a result of the Protestant Reformation—of reading as applying to passages only: “under the older conception, both words (in Scripture) and things (in the world of nature) had meanings. Under the new, Protestant conception, only words had meaning; objects didn’t” (37). The result, according to Harrison, was that “The natural world, once the indispensable medium between words and eternal truths, lost its meanings, and became opaque to those hermeneutical procedures which had once elucidated it. It was left to an emerging natural science to reinvest the created order with intelligibility” (Harrison, qtd. in Cassedy, 37).

The notion that the world itself contains meaning is reasserted, Cassedy argues, in Berkeley’s work on perception. Following Kenneth Winkler, Cassedy finds in Berkeley a “semiotic theory of vision,” “founded on the notion that seeing is a matter of recovering meanings from signs whose connections with those meanings are purely conventional and arbitrary” (39). This notion is reminiscent of medieval “book of nature” ideas, but with the crucial difference provided by Berkeley’s (in)famous immaterialism, which, Cassedy argues, sets the stage for idealism and romanticism.

Chapter Three, “Idealism and Romanticism,” was for me the most intriguing and the most helpful of the book. It begins from an extended discussion of Johan Georg Hamann, who

“embedded language in the very fabric of the world itself, which he viewed as God’s text” (44). This leads naturally to the idea of a close connection between the perceptual senses (*die Sinne*) and sense (*Sinn*), an idea which Cassedy takes up in the next subsection of the chapter. His short history of the German *Sinn* invokes its early connotations of movement, change of place, and direction, and traces its development through to a more modern conception that builds in a certain “fuzziness” or indeterminacy.

Chapter Three focuses especially on one of the twenty four definitions of *Sinn* provided in the Grimm Brothers’ mid-nineteenth-century *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, which notes that “[i]n modern times, *Sinn* is customarily and commonly [used] for the meaning [*Bedeutung*], the opinion [*Meinung*], the spiritual content, the intention [*Tendenz*] of an expression, a work, or (more rarely) an action, as distinguished from its wording [*Wortlaut*] or its outward appearance” (qtd. in Cassedy, 49). In this later usage, Cassedy notes, *Sinn* is most often connotative, whereas the German *bedeuten* and *Bedeutung*—like the English *meaning*—is more likely to be denotative. This of course tracks both the well-known distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* as marked by Frege in the essay of that name (Frege 1892), and also discussions of denotation and connotation in English from, e.g., Mill (1843, I.2.§5). Puzzlingly, there is no treatment of these obvious touchstones in this chapter or elsewhere in the text, despite the fact that Frege’s is concerned with precisely the same German terms, and Mill falls into precisely the same historical period as the German authors discussed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three then further traces the notion of *Sinn* in Kant, through pre-Critical writings such as *Dreams of a Spirit-seer* and into the first *Critique*, where “Like the Latin *sensum/sensus/sentientia*, *Sinn* conveys both the receiving, sentient mind and the properties of objects that the mind cognizes and interprets” (56-7). Kant’s use of the term stands in stark contrast, Cassedy reports, to that of later romantic-era figures such as Novalis (whose “grand, mysterious statements” about meaning are treated by Cassedy at great and somewhat puzzling length), Goethe, Schlegel, Schleiermacher, and Herder. It is in these romantic-era figures that we first encounter sustained engagement with the German phrase “*Sinn des Lebens*,” the philosophical and intellectual precursor to contemporary English’s “meaning of life,” and with the call to rediscover the original sense or meaning of the world by re-enchanting or romanticizing it (64). Herder’s 1772 *Treatise on the Origin of Language* is given strikingly brief treatment—especially in contrast to the expansive discussion of Novalis—and is discussed only in the context of its influence on Schleiermacher.

Chapter Four begins with a brief treatment of Kierkegaard, due to his explicit invocations of the “meaning of,” and sometimes “in” “life” (74-75), but his usage of these phrases is dismissed as relatively “uneventful.” (The influence of broader themes in Kierkegaard’s work on twentieth-century writers, due to the appearance of English translations of his work, is returned to in more detail in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight). The bulk of Chapter Four consists of extensive discussions of Thomas Carlyle, including Carlyle’s engagement with Novalis, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Carlyle’s work represents for Cassedy the movement of German culture into British culture over the course of the nineteenth century (77), and in his partly satirical novel *Sartor Resartus* we find what Cassedy suspects to be the first use of the phrase “the meaning of life” in English, “where the phrase refers not to the meaning, or definition, of the word *life* but to the meaning of life itself” (82).

Emerson brought Carlyle's novel to the United States, where it was influential for the American Transcendentalists. Emerson was also influenced directly by earlier German mystics such as Novalis, as well as by the uptake of German romanticism in Coleridge, from whom he took the notion of the "book of nature" that would be influential in Emerson's extended engagements with the theme of nature and humankind's place in it. Emerson, Cassedy plausibly argues, "envisages a world in which we 'read' (metaphorically speaking) and interpret not just actual books but, well, that world itself, which he implicitly represents as yielding up *meaning*, *significance*, *sense* to our acts of interpretation" (90). This amounts to a form of idealism reminiscent of Berkeley and Kant, but in which "the mind or consciousness always bleeds over into a mysterious spiritual realm that appears to be simultaneously coextensive with and hidden from it" (92). For Cassedy, such a mystical, book-of-nature connotation of "meaning" in English is a major component of our contemporary usage and understanding of the term.

Chapter Five turns to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, including some intriguing comparison of the Russian *smysl* and the German *Sinn* (95). From Tolstoy's increasingly religious writings—especially due to their popularity with readers of English-language translations appearing in the early twentieth century—and in references to Tolstoy in well-known works such as James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, we first get the close connection between meaning and *purpose* that is also part of our contemporary understanding of the word. Due to Dostoevsky's existentialism and the centrality of mortality for so many of his characters, Cassedy suggests, readers find in his works a more secular treatment of meaning in life than in Tolstoy, despite Dostoevsky's frequent association of the phrase "meaning of life" with the immortality of the soul. "'The meaning of life,' with its enormous potential for ambiguity, is a phrase that allows the secularist to form at least a partial understanding of what a person of putatively pure religious faith actually believes" (118).

II.

As the above overview suggests, the real focus of Cassedy's book is not the notion of meaning as such, but the way in which the word has come to be associated with concepts like value and purpose, as in the phrase "the meaning of life," which would seem to be quite far from the ancient Greek usage of the verb "to mean" and from its later European-language verbal and nominal relatives. In all these earlier cases, "meaning" is primarily a matter of signification, of what signs, words, and language *do* (15). Cassedy thus seeks to understand the relationship between what we might call the semiotic or *semantic* connotation of "meaning" and its more recent purposive or *axiological* connotation. In this regard, the book is both original and important: he is one of very few recent authors who appears to have thought carefully and extensively about the relationship between meaning in these two senses. As Cassedy puts it, in a glib criticism of a passage from Charles Taylor, "telling us first that meaning means 'meaning' and 'significance' and next that it means the same thing that it means in the phrase 'the meaning of life' doesn't really narrow things down very much" (2).

Even in contemporary academic philosophy, discussions of these semantic and axiological conceptions of meaning continue to be worlds apart, with discussion of the former located in particular sub-domains of the analytic philosophy of language or (post-?) post-structuralist pontifications about signs and signifiers, whereas discussion of the latter is located primarily

among philosophers writing in the domains of ethics, social-political philosophy, and related areas of value theory. The fact that philosophical treatments of meaning have become so divergent is intriguing and alarming, at least if Cassedy is right that these notions are related in more than merely homophonic ways. In this sense, I think the book can be read as a kind of call to action for the reintegration of philosophical (and not merely pop-cultural) investigations of meaning. This call to action is to be applauded, in my view, and indeed is one I have tried to take some small steps toward in my own work. I return to this theme toward the end of this review.

Unfortunately, Cassedy's treatment of this issue is limited to a more-or-less genealogical account of how the change came about: the book answers the question, "How does a word that fundamentally has to do with signs, words, stories, and other things that, well, mean or signify something come to mean 'purpose' and 'value'? How does it come to mean all the other things it appears to mean, apart from 'signify'?" (4). While Cassedy offers us a detailed (if not always balanced, as I note below) historical account of the emergence of these additional connotations of the word, he doesn't offer much beyond that genealogical account as to *why* this divergence occurred.

But perhaps this is part of his point: that there is really nothing ultimately beyond the genealogical account—there is no deep reason, at least none available to human beings—for *why* meaning came to have the meaning that it now, in Western popular culture, has. There is, perhaps, only something like the Nietzschean revaluation of values that it signifies (I'm putting words in Cassedy's mouth here; there is actually strikingly little engagement with Nietzsche in the book, given its theme, and that minor engagement is only indirect, appearing in the context of discussions of Paul Tillich). This claim would seem to fit with Cassedy's explicit thesis about the ambiguity of the contemporary usage of "meaning": "what we mean when we talk about meaning" is ultimately, necessarily, "polyvalent" (8, 33, 182). "It's the very fluidity that gives meaning its peculiar resonance and mystique and that allows it to live with equal comfort in the writings of secular scientists and the official decrees of Catholic popes. That's the ambiguity that lends this word its peculiar and characteristic power—what makes it the quintessentially modern word" (10). The power of this polyvalence is that it allows meaning to refer to whatever it is that fills a void in the existential dimension of our contemporary lives, just as philosophical-religious figures like Tillich and Ulrich Barth suggested it should.

Hence the book's extensive focus, in the twentieth-century portion of its historical genealogy, on such popularizing philosophical-religious figures—a treatment that turns increasing toward the popularizing, and increasingly away from the philosophical, with its coverage of each subsequent decade. For Cassedy, the meaning of "meaning" began to fracture in the twentieth century alongside (and perhaps because of) its more popular uptake. The fracturing begins, as discussed in Chapters Six and Seven, with the extensive employment of the term in the English-language writings of Tillich, Barth, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and increases in the oft-announced "age of anxiety" in American culture—a term that Cassedy traces to W.H. Auden's poem with that name published in the U.S. in 1947, and a term which was firmly entrenched in popular discourse by the early 1960s. "Meaning" has by this time come to serve an increasingly therapeutic purpose, a panacea for a variety of existential woes characteristic of modern American life in the post-war period. With regard to the source of these woes, Cassedy has much to say about contemporaneous changes in mainstream religious belief, but relatively little to say about the

effects of the second World War, the Holocaust, or an increasingly capitalist, consumerist American society. In any case, in the post-war period, the term “anxiety,” like the “meaning” that is popularly believed to contain its cure, has come “to denote a remarkably wide range of things” (131).

In Chapter Eight, Cassedy documents a shift from religious to more popular, scientific, and therapeutic conceptions of meaning, and a corresponding expansion of its usage as both cure-all and catch-all term. This change is tracked via an account of the development of existential psychotherapy in figures such as Victor Frankl and Rollo May (Frankl is singled out for particularly extensive and trenchant criticism, about which I am not qualified to comment), through treatments of recent biochemical approaches to meaning such as the work of Barbara Fredrickson (approaches about which I am skeptical, but again not qualified to comment), and in the contemporary proliferation of works that give center-stage to the notion of meaning, while hardly ever defining it, in the contemporary self-help movement (about which I think no additional comment necessary). Thus, Cassedy argues, from the late 1960s to the present, at least in mainstream American society, meaning increasingly becomes “a suggestive term, undefined, unspecific, and preponderantly secular, designed to conjure in our minds the idea of something grand, mysterious, and unnamed that, owing to our particular life circumstances, we must strive for” (140).

In this light, Cassedy’s polyvalence thesis is both unique and refreshing, and certainly speaks to the era of human social and intellectual history that we find ourselves in today—an era which, Cassedy convincingly argues, has been presaged by the enormous uptick of concern with anxiety and meaninglessness beginning in the early twentieth century. However, there are points in the book where Cassedy’s polyvalence thesis comes off like the hasty conclusion of a student who has closely read the relevant texts, but not moved much beyond a survey of positions (with requisite fascination and awe) to the analytical work of crafting an original and nuanced thesis about them: the thesis is simply *that they differ*. The overarching claim that the meaning of meaning is ambiguous because it has to be thus comes off—at least to this reader—sometimes as thoughtful and sometimes as glib.

At some points, the book reads like a collection of essays held together loosely by their relation to meaning and more generally by the fact that the author happened to want to write and reflect on the texts they interpret. There is nothing wrong with this in principle, of course—all academics do this to some degree—but in this case it results in a book whose treatment appears uneven. While the entire period of Western thought from Augustine to Bishop Berkeley is surveyed in a single chapter, the period from the end of the second World War to the present takes up approximately one third of the book. This is natural, of course, given that things are often more interesting to us as we get closer to the present, but what is less natural is the change in focus as the book moves chronologically. Up through its treatment of the “Russian Titans” Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, in Chapter Five, the book deals entirely with what we might call “high intellectual culture” figures, from the worlds of theology, literature, and philosophy. But beginning in Chapter Seven, and even to some degree in the first treatment of Tillich in Chapter Six, Cassedy’s chronological narrative turns almost exclusively to a more “popular culture” orientation, discussing sources like self-help books, popular psychology, references to “meaning” in *Time* magazine, etc. This, in part, reflects Cassedy’s thesis: that in the later

twentieth century, the obsession with meaning became a mainstream phenomenon, making its way, in light of growing existential concern in the “age of anxiety,” into popular culture and even into the marketplace via the contemporary self-help industry.

But the book almost entirely neglects the fact that meaning never diminished as a topic of conversation in more “high culture” domains in the twentieth century. There is no mention of, e.g., the linguistic turn in philosophy or the resultant projects of linguistic or conceptual analysis in the analytic tradition,² and no substantial account of the consideration of meaning in late nineteenth and twentieth-century continental figures such as Dilthey, Nietzsche, or Heidegger, except as minor precursors to the thought of Tillich and Barth. There is, by contrast, extensive treatment of Tillich, and especially of his more popular writings, including his article in the 1966 issue of *Time* magazine with the iconic “Is God Dead?” cover, despite its status as, in Cassedy’s words, “quite possibly, in the history of American popular periodical literature, the most famous article that no one actually read—or remembers having read” (119). We are told that, by the time of the appearance of Tillich’s article in 1966, the word “meaning” “has traveled a winding path, in its guise as the German *Sinn*, from the nineteenth-century German philosophy and theology that we’ve examined so far, through such twentieth-century German and French thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Camus, and Sartre” (128-9). But little further treatment of these figures is offered, except, occasionally, in the footnotes.

Indeed, there is only the briefest mention and quick dismissal of *Sinn*-analysis among phenomenologists and neo-Kantians: in a discussion of German philosophical accounts of *Sinn* as influences on Tillich, Cassedy assures us that “[w]e can safely set aside the philosophical genealogy of the concept (it stems from Edmund Husserl and an obscure philosopher named Emil Lask), whose details need not concern us” (122). It’s not clear why this dismissal is “safe.” Why needn’t these details concern us, and in what sense are figures such as Lask too obscure to merit discussion? Given that earlier chapters of the book discuss historical philosophical figures—even less well-known ones such as Hugh of St. Victor (34)—in some depth, the decision to gloss over large swaths of late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth-century philosophical work that would seem relevant for Cassedy’s overall thesis and aims in the book seems to stem more from the whims of the author’s own reading than from any serious scholarly research strategy. It’s as if the robust and highly influential discussions of meaning in the twentieth-century analytic and phenomenological traditions never happened. This omission would be understandable in a book devoted to popular, rather than academic-philosophical conceptions of meaning throughout Western intellectual history, but given its extensive discussions of figures such as Augustine, Berkeley, and Kant in earlier chapters, the sudden shift to exclusively popular conceptions of meaning in the twentieth century is quite jarring. Even if Cassedy’s point is to show how meaning in the twentieth century went mainstream, it seems odd for an academic monograph to downplay the persisting deeper academic undercurrents.

I do not doubt that there is much to learn from the way that the term meaning has functioning in the popular American imagination in recent decades. Indeed, I found the treatment of this theme in the last four chapters of the book to be both enjoyable and edifying. But earlier chapters are not limited to the American context, and do not offer extensive accounts of the usage of meaning in the popular imagination of, e.g., the farmer of the Middle Ages or the industrial worker of the

² Especially pertinent, given the Cassedy’s titular focus, is Ogden and Richards 1923.

nineteenth century. If the “we” in *What Do We Mean When We Talk About Meaning?* refers to popular rather than academic culture in the later decades of the twentieth century, it’s not clear why Cassedy addresses it with regard to the latter rather than the former in his treatment of previous centuries.

Cassedy returns to academic (as opposed to popular) work on meaning, to some degree, in Chapter Nine, “Meaning Bridges the Secular and the Sacred.” The chapter focuses primarily on appeals to meaning in the contemporary faith traditions of Catholics, Evangelicals, and Hasidic Jews (171-180), focusing on texts from Popes John Paul II and Francis, evangelical Pastor and popular author Rick Warren, and Rabbi Simon Jacobson, director of the Meaningful Life Center in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. As a philosopher and not a theologian or scholar of religions, I will not comment on these discussions, except to note that this chapter provides a nice bookend to the treatment of meaning in medieval theology in Chapter Two, and seems largely interested in exploring the relation between the secular and the sacred for its own sake, rather than primarily as a point of confluence in recent popular discussions of meaning.

Chapter Nine also includes some discussion of Charles Taylor (163-171), including a helpful tracing of Taylor’s diagnosis of contemporary “disenchantment” to the usage of that term in Max Weber’s 1919 “Science as Vocation” (166-168), and brief discussion of Phillip Kitcher’s recent work on secular humanism (169-171). At this point in the book, the reader might expect a return to the focus on philosophical and theological treatments present in the first few historical chapters, but this time from a contemporary academic perspective, and perhaps a more detailed treatment of the relation between the semantic and axiological senses of “meaning” noted above. Surprisingly, however, there is very little detailed treatment of the upswing in recent decades in philosophical literature on the meaning of/in life (e.g., Richard Taylor, Thomas Nagel, John Kekes, Susan Wolf, Terry Eagleton, Thaddeus Metz, John Cottingham, etc.). Metz, Cottingham, and Eagleton are discussed briefly in the introduction, where Cassedy admits that they have written whole books on the concept of meaning and living a meaningful life, but they are quickly dismissed for not offering summary *definitions* of the word “meaning,” whereas recent popular treatments are discussed at great length, even though the definitions on offer from these sources are often found to be “not helpful” (144, 179) or completely lacking (154, 158, 161, 169).

Throughout the book, Cassedy is laser-focused on *definitions* of the word “meaning,” and on which words (e.g., “purpose,” “goal,” “value,” “significance”) various authors appear consider synonyms.³ This is the primary form of evidence given in support of his polyvalence thesis, and perhaps this focus stems naturally from his training and orientation as a scholar of comparative literature. But Cassedy seems to neglect the possibility that—excluding the more popular treatments featured in the final few chapters, in which cases ambiguous usage is perhaps more

³ Along related lines, another issue that merits mention—this is not a shortcoming of the book by any means, but a necessary limitation—is that Cassedy’s treatment, while it focuses on historical precursors in a variety of Western languages, is ultimately focused on the *English-language word* “meaning.” The book is clearly intended primarily for an Anglophone readership, and while there are some helpful treatments of various senses of, for instance, the French *sens* and the German *Bedeutung* and *Sinn* (though, as already noted, no discussion of Frege’s important account, and only passing treatment of Husserl’s), these are offered as part of the historical-genealogical story rather than as standalone treatments of contemporary French and German authors and usages. And there is no comparative treatment of terms similar to meaning (historical or contemporary) in non-Western languages. In this sense, Cassedy’s treatment is necessarily (and, again, excusably) incomplete.

permissible—“meaning” is not given a simple, easily quotable definition in the works modern philosophical or theological figures not because it is ambiguous but because it is *complicated* or *beyond words*.

III.

This is, indeed, a central lesson of twentieth-century phenomenological treatments of meaning. Allow me to dwell on this point in concluding, given the venue of this review. Unlike their analytic counterparts, phenomenologists (especially, e.g., Husserl and Merleau-Ponty), refused to limit their conceptions of meaning to simple definitions or even to accounts of *linguistic* meaning. This broader, phenomenological approach to meaning is a central component of the philosophical genealogy of *Sinn* that Cassedy assures us—as noted above—“we can safely set aside,” and “whose details need not concern us” (122). By refusing to treat meaning exclusively within the confines of a philosophy of language, phenomenologists such as Husserl indeed presage, in an intellectually more rigorous, if necessarily more complicated way, the very move to consider meaning as the antidote to existential crises in the later part of the twentieth century that Cassedy presents in painstaking detail in the second half of the book. What is Husserl’s *Crisis*, if not a call to recover the level of meaning that belongs originally not to our language or our systems of scientific abstraction but most fundamentally to the lifeworld of everyday experience, the “general ‘ground’ of human world-life” (1970, 155).

For Husserl, it is through the ongoing synthesis of sensory givens arising from individual perspectives that we uncover—and *make*—law-governed determinations of meaning:

[A]s bearers of ‘sense [*Sinn*]’ in each phase, as meaning something [*Etwas meinende*], the perspectives combine in an advancing *enrichment of meaning* [*Sinnbereicherung*] and a continuing *development of meaning* [*Sinnfortbildung*], such that what no longer appears is still valid as retained and such that the prior meaning which anticipates a continuous flow, the expectation of ‘what is to come,’ is straightaway fulfilled and more closely determined. (1970, 158)

In its focus on the concrete details of lived experience, phenomenology interrogates precisely the point of intersection Cassedy emphasizes in Augustine and later idealism and romanticism between sense (*Sinn, sens*) as the modality or content of perception (sensation), and sense as the basic unit of meaning or meaningfulness. Without simply equating meaning with sensory givenness, and thus avoiding the dreaded “myth of the given,”⁴ phenomenology insists on interrogating their complex and difficult *connection*. Seen in this light, phenomenology appears to be the ultimate return to the readability of the *world*, rather than just of the *text*, if ever there was one!

Indeed, in this light, classical phenomenology can also be interpreted as offering the last great attempt—prior to the hyper-specialization of philosophy in the latter half of the twentieth century that made such attempts almost impossible—to theorize the relation between the axiological and semantic or semiotic dimensions of meaning. Meaning pertains both to language and to the value

⁴ On this important challenge to phenomenological approaches meaning, perception, and knowledge, see especially the essays collected in De Santis and Manca, forthcoming.

in living a life not simply because our experience is often mediated by language and concepts (though of course it is), but because lived experiences are themselves enactments of meaningfulness and value or “axiological nuance” (Scheler 1973, 18). Human beings are not just language-animals (Taylor 2016), concept-mongerers (Brandom 1994, 8, 620) or meaning-users, but meaning-makers. Our *making sense* of the world is a necessary component of our life projects. If sense (meaning) were not made, but simply *found*, our lives could not be meaningful—could not even, ultimately, *make* sense—for we could have no life *projects*. This point of connection between the axiological and semantic or semiotic is obscured when we think of meaning-making exclusively via models such as defining, naming, reading, writing or conceptualizing. It becomes much clearer when we include models of meaning-making that more fully reflect our ways of being in the world, such as ritual, dance, or everyday embodied movements like the blind man navigating the world via his cane, which is for him not merely a “sensitive zone” but also the “primary sphere” in which “the sense of all significations [le *sens de tout les significations*]” is given (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 143-44).

I do not mean to suggest that the phenomenological tradition has definitively explained this connection—I don’t think it has—but it may well be the last major movement in Western philosophy that seriously *tried*, without defaulting to the comfort of more isolated problems limited to examination in the domain of value theory or the philosophy of language. Cassedy’s neglect of this thread of the history of what we mean when we talk about meaning thus seems to me most regrettable, if perhaps understandable given the enormous ambition and historical scope of the book.

Conclusion

These criticisms aside, *What Do We Mean when We Talk About Meaning?* is an original, thoughtful, well-written, and wide-ranging examination a theme of major importance both for academic philosophy and for understanding our wider contemporary lifeworld. It should have broad appeal to philosophers, intellectual historians, students of comparative literature, and even theologians and sociologists. It helpfully synthesizes a wide breadth of historical and contemporary sources and is a welcome contribution for all of us interested in the perennial question of the meaning of meaning.

Bibliography

- Brandom, Robert. 1994. *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* Harvard University Press.
- De Santis, Daniele and Danilo Manca, eds. forthcoming. *Wilfrid Sellars and Phenomenology: Intersections, Encounters, Oppositions*. Series in Continental Thought. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Frege, Gottlob. 1892. "Über Sinn Und Bedeutung." *Zeitschrift für Philosophie Und Philosophische Kritik* 100 (1): 25-50.
- Grice, Herbert Paul. 1957. "Meaning." *Philosophical Review* 66 (3): 377-388.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1970. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Translated by David Carr Northwestern University Press.

- Husserl, Edmund. 2001. *Logical Investigations*. Translated by J. N. Findlay, edited by Dermot Moran. paperback ed. Vol. I. New York: Routledge.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2012. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1843. *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* University of Toronto Press.
- Ogden, C. K., and I. A. Richards. 1923. *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and the Science of Symbolism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
- Taylor, Charles. 2016. *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* Harvard University Press.