Given the undeniable influence of the linguistic turn in both Continental and analytic traditions, it is not uncommon to characterize philosophy in the twentieth century as centrally concerned with meaning. But many of the figures who helped to inspire that turn did not think of meaning exclusively in terms of language, as philosophers in both traditions have tended to do since. Are there important aspects of meaning that we miss in analyzing it only as a linguistic phenomenon? In response to later twentieth-century accounts that tend to limit the scope of meaning to the semantic, semiotic or conceptual, I use the work of Husserl and Wittgenstein to highlight the epistemic role of non-linguistic and embodied pre-conditions for meaning in everyday lived experience (Erlebnis), situating the project historically as a legacy of Kant’s Critical transcendental epistemology and systematically in terms of contemporary debates about non-conceptual content.

Chapter One argues that a robust theory of meaning must take account of the way the conditions of the possibility for meaning are determined by value-bearing features of everyday experience, features that are not themselves inherently linguistic or conceptual. Most contemporary non-conceptualist accounts of perceptual experience, while right in their resistance to conceptualism along these lines, fail to adequately theorize the role of the non-conceptual on its own terms, reducing non-conceptual elements of experience to a mere “fodder” for conceptualization and ignoring the epistemic role the non-conceptual plays in structuring and orienting our experience. I argue that this shortcoming can be overcome through a phenomenological approach that examines the full range of experiential structures—including those not mediated by language or concepts—by which meaning is constituted.

In the rest of the dissertation I defend and expand upon this claim historically, tracing a series of developments in the theories of meaning of Husserl and Wittgenstein. Chapter Two shows how, in seeking to guarantee the objectivity of logic against psychologism by assigning pure a priori status to the structure of possible meaning content, each authors’ early work situates meaning in a way that is “closed off” from the intentional structure of lived experience. Chapter Three traces Husserl's revisions for the second edition of the Logical Investigations (1913) and Wittgenstein’s writings on “phenomenology” in the late 1920s, showing how both manifest an “opening up” of the theory of meaning to intentionality and experience, for Husserl through a greater focus on the act and quality of judgments in addition to their content, and for Wittgenstein through a revision of his earlier conception, in the Tractatus, of the role of “projection” in meaning.

Chapter Four shows how, despite this commonality, the authors differ methodologically in their views concerning the possibility of descriptions of lived experience: Husserl explicitly takes up the task of the description of the phenomenological dimension of meaning in his project of re-conceptualizing and expanding the Kantian Transcendental Aesthetic as the realm of transcendental meaning constitution. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, flirts with but eventually rejects the idea of a special “phenomenological language” capable of such descriptions. This is at the heart of the differences between Husserl’s lifeworld and Wittgenstein’s notion of form of life, which are treated in Chapter Five. There I show how Husserl in his later work began to develop an account according to which non-conceptual structures of the lifeworld such as intentional horizons and pre-predicative “types” play a role in the constitution of meaning by orienting the intentional gaze while not directly contributing linguistic or conceptual representational content. I then show how, for the later Wittgenstein, while there is nothing meaningful to be said outside the conceptual space of language games, the epistemic dependence of linguistic meaning upon non-linguistic social practices (forms of life) appears when we temper the exacting pretensions of analysis with attention to the “rough ground” of lived experience.

I conclude by arguing that—despite important differences—developments in the theory of meaning of both authors point to an inexact, non-linguistic dimension of meaningfulness or significance rooted in experiential life: the lifeworld (Husserl) or form(s) of life (Wittgenstein). In neither case are the characteristic vagueness, non-conceptual status, and incomplete analyzability of this dimension of meaning taken as shortcomings. What appears from the standpoint of linguistic or conceptual analysis to be an undesirable inexactness is in the later conceptions of both philosophers a recognition of the primacy of the lived and social meaningfulness of everyday life, which includes but outstrips conceptual and linguistic representation. In addition to its contributions to epistemology, philosophy of language, mind, and the history of philosophy, the dissertation helps to illustrate the systematic importance of research on topics such as embodiment, affect or emotion, kinesthetic or sensorimotor knowledge, and “enactivist” conceptions of the mind, themes of growing interest on both sides of the Continental/ Anglo-American divide and in an increasing variety of disciplines outside of philosophy.