Abstract

One of the most frequently occurring terms in Paul Tillich’s theology is meaning (in his English writings) or Sinn (in his German writings). But Tillich used both in multiple senses, without acknowledging or even appearing to be aware that he was doing so. He wrote only in German till he immigrated to the United States at the age of forty-seven. He used the German Sinn abundantly in his native tongue, and with a variety of meanings: a universal medium for understanding the world; “sense,” as in “making sense” or what is missing in “senseless” (sinnlos) statements; “the unconditional” (“das Unbedingte”); a “thing pointed at” (in Tillich’s theory of symbols and signs); a grand metaphysical quality of some undefined sort; the object-correlate of an act of cognition; and “God.” He drew on the German Sinn when he began to write in English but, because of the grammatical status of meaning as a verbal noun, the English term allowed Tillich to ascribe agency to things that in his view bear meaning, for example the thing that grasps us when we are in the state of faith. In addition, the English word meaning for Tillich meant “comprehensibility,” “value,” “direction,” from existential philosophy (what is missing when life is meaningless); “ultimate concern” (the “meaning which gives meaning to all meanings”); in the plural, something undefined that the human person “lives in”; and “God.” The change from German to English accompanied a change in his conception of faith, raising the possibility that the new language moved Tillich’s theology in a new direction.
Introduction

If you were to look through the English-language writings of Paul Tillich for a word that occupies a central position in his worldview and that occurs with greater frequency than any of the conventional terms in Christian theology, it is meaning (together with its combining forms meaningful, meaningless, and meaninglessness). Occurrences of meaning, meaningful, meaningless, and meaninglessness far outnumber occurrences of such terms as God, Jesus, Christ, spirit, and soul. Tillich (with Reinhold Niebuhr) was that rarest of birds: a theologian who enjoyed a popular following in the United States and was much celebrated in the popular press. Reporters who followed him and his work during the height of his popularity in the United States, the 1950s till several years after his death in 1965, seemed to agree that he was all about meaning. The unnamed author of a cover story for Time magazine in 1959 quotes a passage from Systematic Theology where Tillich writes of the Kingdom of God as “the meaning, fulfillment, and unity of history.” In the same article, we read that Tillich has claimed traditional Christian concepts have “lost their meaning.”1 And in the cover story for Time’s famous “Is God Dead?” issue in April 1966, John T. Elson leads off with the red-letter question, which he describes as “a summons to reflect on the meaning of existence.” As Elson sees it, Tillich is a seminal figure in a movement that has organized itself around questions such as, “What is the meaning of my life?”2

Scholars agree that meaning occupies a central position in Tillich’s thought. Ethicist Ian E. Thompson devoted an entire book to the subject.3 A glance through The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich will show how naturally Tillich’s commentators gravitate toward the topic of meaning. In “Tillich as Systematic Theologian,” Oswald Beyer writes about “Tillich’s doctrine of the abyss of meaninglessness” and claims that Tillich’s doctrine of justification is bound to “the category of meaning.”4 In “Tillich on God,” Martin Leiner tells us that Tillich defines “the Unconditional” in terms of meaning and that recent research has revealed “a sinntheoretische [having to do with a theory of meaning] turn in Tillich’s philosophy of religion.”5 In “Tillich’s Christology,” Anne Marie Reijnen writes about humanity’s “quest for meaning,” asking the Tillichian question whether such a quest would have resulted in the discovery of “the figure of some christ [with lower-case c] or other.”6 And in “Tillich’s Philosophy,” Christian Danz claims that

1 “To Be or Not to Be,” Time (16 March 1959) 46–48, 51–52.
Tillich elaborated “an idealist-neo-Kantian theory of meaning,” citing Tillich’s study of Husserl, Rickert, Windelband, and others who “represent the main contributors to the [then] contemporary debates about theories of meaning.” For Tillich, as Danz sees it, “the concept of meaning became the explanatory framework within which the concept of religion was construed.” Add to this the scholarship on the theories of symbols (two chapters in The Cambridge Companion, and many in scholarly journals), and meaning appears to emerge as a core notion in Tillich’s worldview.

The trouble is that meaning is not one core notion but many. To begin with, we must not forget that Tillich wrote in two languages: German and, after his immigration to the United States in 1933, English. He thus used two words—Sinn in German and meaning in English—for what English-language scholarship refers to almost exclusively as meaning. German Sinn and English meaning are not identical to each other. Furthermore, each word in its own language comprises a variety of meanings that overlap with each other but are not identical. To complicate matters further, Tillich, like any writer or speaker in any language, lent key terms such as Sinn and meaning senses often peculiar to his own turn of mind. Thus to claim, while writing in English, that meaning is a central concept in Tillich’s thought is to be misleadingly reductive on several counts. More accurately put, (a) Sinn in German and meaning in English are central terms in Tillich’s theology, (b) each comprises a range of different but often overlapping senses in its own language, (c) the different senses in each language sometimes overlap with some of the senses in the other language, and (d) the move from German to English not only was followed by, but also possibly facilitated, a significant shift in Tillich’s theological thinking—raising the question whether language drove the new theology or whether the new theology simply had the good fortune of finding a hospitable medium in the new language.

Meaning in German

Tillich lived his life as a theologian and academic, writing and speaking only in his native tongue till the age of forty-seven when he immigrated to the United States. If he used the English meaning so ubiquitously in his adopted homeland, he must no doubt have carried over elements of the corresponding words in German. But here we immediately encounter difficulties. It is worth at least mentioning that German has two overlapping but non-synonymous words that could be translated into English as meaning: Sinn and Bedeutung. While Bedeutung is similar to meaning in that it is a verbal noun and denotes the action of the verb bedeuten, “to mean” in the sense of “to signify,” Sinn is the word that most commonly appears in contexts similar to those in which the English meaning appears. “The meaning of life,” for example, is almost always “der Sinn des Lebens” in German and much less often “die Bedeutung des Lebens.” In his pre-American period, Tillich used

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the word *Sinn* as abundantly as he used *meaning* in his English writings. He rarely used *Bedeutung*. The question is whether, when he wrote in his adopted language, he understood *meaning* as something different from *Sinn*.

*Sinn* is not at all identical to the English *meaning*, and even the phrase “der Sinn des Lebens” does not mean the exact same thing(s) as the English phrase “the meaning of life.” *Sinn* has a peculiar history in German. Its root sense has to do with moving and traveling, hence with the notion of direction and, by extension, with goals and purposes. Early in its history, *Sinn* took on an association with mental states: sensing, thinking, and feeling, like the Latin *sensus* (to which, despite what appears to be an obvious resemblance, it is only very remotely related). It steps in to denote the senses, as in sensory (*sinnlich*) experience or “sensibility” (*Sinnlichkeit*), Kant’s name for the faculty that receives “intuitions” (*Anschauungen*) from the outside world. Only subsequently does it come to denote “meaning” of a word or sentence, and even then the emphasis appears to be more on the mind that understands a word than on something that the word contains. The meaning of the word *meaning* in the English phrase “the meaning of life” is ambiguous in the extreme and so, often, is the German word *Sinn* in the phrase “der Sinn des Lebens.” But the German word is much more likely to suggest “sense,” “direction,” or “explanation” than is the English *meaning*. If I say, “Life is meaningless,” I can be obscurely suggesting any number of things that are wanting in life, including some sort of undefined essence evoked by the word *meaning*. But if I say, in German, “Das Leben ist sinnlos,” I might be saying nothing more than that life is senseless, that it “makes no sense,” that I can find no explanation for it. Then again, I might be suggesting that life lacks direction, a goal, a purpose. Or I might be suggesting that life lacks a something-or-other that is analogous, mutatis mutandis, to the meaning of a word, sign, or symbol—something that I can recover through an act of interpretation.

The notion of meaning (*Sinn*) as applied to such broad concepts as life, nature, human existence, and the world appears to have arisen in Germany at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Among writers in the German *Hochromantik*, there was a tendency to view the world as a book or set of holy scriptures, containing signs and symbols whose meaning (*Sinn*) was to be discovered. The late Hans Blumenberg wrote about this in *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (1981). Novalis, for example, in his very short life, wrote some extremely suggestive, though characteristically enigmatic, statements about meaning, book, and world. One of the poet’s most provocative phrases includes a reference to “the meaning of the world”: “Everything that we experience is a message. Thus is the world in fact a message, a revelation of the spirit. The time is no more when the spirit of God was comprehensible. The meaning [*Sinn*] of the world has gone
missing. We’re left with nothing but the letters [as in letters of the alphabet].”8 A few years earlier Novalis had actually used the phrase “Sinn des Lebens”: “Only an artist can guess the meaning of life.”9

We find similar formulations among romantics of this era. Thanks to the labors of a group of German scholars engaged in what might be called “Meaning of Life Studies,” one can establish a partial list and chronology of statements. Two examples will suffice. The final chapter of Friedrich Schlegel’s visionary romance Lucinde (1799) is a kind of prose poem on the soul. The soul, we read, comes to understand nature, nature reveals itself to the soul “significantly” (bedeutsam), and the soul understands “the holy meaning [Sinn] of life as the beautiful language of Nature.”10 Friedrich Schleiermacher, in Monologen, writes that the artist, always “on the lookout for what might become sign and symbol of mankind . . . seeks secret meaning [Sinn] and harmony in the beautiful color play of Nature.”11

We can get a sense of Tillich’s precursors’ use of meaning as related to life and similarly expansive concepts, from an article on existential philosophy that Tillich published in 1944 in the Journal of the History of Ideas (JHI). That existential philosophy in the twentieth century, in the eyes of Tillich, is concerned with meaning is clear from statements he makes toward the end of the article. “The Existential philosophers,” he writes,

were trying to discover an ultimate meaning of life beyond the reach of re-interpretation, revived theologies, or positivism. . . . Existential philosophy can be called the attempt to reconquer the meaning of life in ‘mystical’ terms after it had been lost in ecclesiastical as well as in positivistic terms. . . . It is the desperate struggle to find a new meaning of life in a reality from which men have been estranged, in a cultural situation in which two great traditions, the Christian and the humanistic, have lost their comprehensive character and their convincing power.12

For Tillich, key precursors from the middle to the late nineteenth century are Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Dilthey (and, much less compellingly, Marx). The works of Kierkegaard are shot through with references to the meaning of life—more, to the best of my knowledge, than in the works of any predecessor in Europe and the United States. Did Tillich come across these references to such an extent that they would have made an impression on him? This is difficult to say with any level of

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8 Novalis, Schriften (ed. Richard Samuel; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960) 2:594, quoted in Hans Blumenberg, Die Lesbarkeit der Welt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981) 256. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.


confidence. In his first English-language book, *The Interpretation of History* (1936), Tillich refers to his “limited” knowledge of Kierkegaard. Yet Tillich as a young student had participated in a study group devoted to the works of Kierkegaard, in addition to mentioning him in the early *Systematische Theologie* (1913). And there can be no doubt of the centrality of Kierkegaard’s thought in Tillich’s intellectual development, as evidenced by the prominence the German-born theologian affords the Danish writer in the *JHI* article and in other writings. From the *JHI* article, we know that Tillich read *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *The Concept of Anxiety*. He cites the former in the English translation that Princeton University Press had recently brought out (1941). We do not know if he had originally read it in German. Tillich refers to the latter, which had not yet appeared in English translation, only as “Kierkegaard’s famous work on *Angst,*” indicating that he had read it in the one German translation in existence when he was still in Germany. Tillich would return to this work in volume 2 of *Systematic Theology* (1957), in a section titled “‘Dreaming Innocence’ and Temptation.” Here he explicitly discusses the word *Angst,* which he identifies as both German and Danish (though Kierkegaard used the alternate Danish spelling *Angest*) and which, he claims, “has become a central concept of existentialism.”

In the German translation of Kierkegaard’s work on anxiety, one of the most striking sentences Tillich would have read is about “the meaning of life” (“Sinn des Lebens”), even though the phrase in Danish (“meng i livet”) would more accurately be translated as “meaning in life.” Kierkegaard’s idea seems to be that if religious faith is present perchance in some individuals and not in others, then we should forget about finding any “meaning in life.” *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* would have furnished Tillich with no examples of “meaning of life,” since only the Danish word *betydning* occurs in connection with life, and the English translator rendered it as *significance,* not *meaning.*

In the *JHI* article, Tillich never refers to an occurrence of “the meaning of life” or similar uses of *meaning* in the works of Kierkegaard. In the case of Nietzsche, however, he does. The quoted passage, which Tillich himself must have translated

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into English (somewhat loosely), is taken from the 1906 *Taschenausgabe* of Nietzsche’s works, specifically from the volumes bearing the title *Wille zur Macht* (Will to power). (The notion of a book under this title, authored or compiled by Nietzsche himself, is discredited nowadays; most of the contents of what passed for such a book are to be found in the voluminous *Nachgelassene Fragmente*—“Posthumous fragments.”) Tillich translates the passage like this: “When we have reached the inevitable universal economic administration of the earth, then mankind as a machine can find its meaning in the service of this monstrous mechanism of smaller and smaller cogs adapted to the whole.”18 In the original German, the phrase that Tillich translated as “find its meaning” is “ihren besten Sinn finden” (“find its best meaning”). Nietzsche’s works include a number of instances of the phrase “Sinn des Lebens,” in most of which *Sinn* appears to mean “purpose” or “aim.” We can hardly be certain about what Nietzsche intended in this passage, which does not include the word *Leben*, but the context, where mankind is represented as machinery (“Maschinerie” in the original German), suggests strongly that *Sinn* is “direction” rather than “meaning.” Yet here is Tillich’s gloss on the passage: “No one any longer knows the significance of this huge process. Mankind demands a new aim, a new meaning for life.”19 *Aim* fits the German; *meaning* does not.

In the same *JHI* article, Wilhelm Dilthey curiously comes up in connection with Nietzsche—a pairing that would be odd in some other contexts. But for Tillich, the works of both philosophers fall under the category of *Lebensphilosophie*. This is a classification that makes sense for each of these thinkers given the emphasis on lived experience and the resistance to positivism that were hallmarks of this philosophy. The single work by Dilthey that Tillich cites (admittedly without directly quoting any material from it), *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (1883), is positively brimming with references to the *Sinn* not of life, but of history. Thus philosophy of history, as Dilthey sees it, concerns itself not only with causal connections in history but also with “the meaning [Sinn] of the historical process, i.e., its value and its goal [Ziel]” such that when this philosophy assumes a teleological form, “the meaning [Sinn], purpose [Zweck], value that it sees realized in the world is also represented.”20 Here, once again, where the dominant idea is process and movement and where consequently the notion of direction is present, *meaning* is an incomplete if not misleading translation of *Sinn*. If Tillich read further in Dilthey, he surely encountered the larger idea of hermeneutics and interpretation as applied to history. This is where the legacy of Schleiermacher and the romantic notion of reading the world—or reading history—as if it were a book, thus finding *meaning* in the world and history, emerge at the end of the nineteenth century. When it came

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to interpreting and thus understanding history, Dilthey uses both Bedeutung and Sinn. In many instances, he does not explicitly distinguish between the two terms, but when he does, it is generally to assign Bedeutung to the meaning of smaller units—words in a text and, by analogy, discrete events in history—and Sinn to the import of something larger—an entire sentence in a text and, say, an entire life in history.

Here the English translator runs into a serious problem. If we are studying a text and are first examining an individual word, meaning is what immediately comes to mind to denote what we find when we interpret that word. If, like Dilthey, we believe that what we find on interpreting an entire sentence or an entire literary work is something qualitatively different from what we find on interpreting an individual word, what English term would accurately denote that something so as to distinguish it from the meaning of an individual word? The closest term we have, which accidentally resembles Sinn, is sense, as in “the overall sense” we have of something. But sense is broad and vague and is often pressed into service when we cannot quite express the “meaning” of something or when we are not sure which of several possible “meanings” to choose from. Of the two English translations of Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften that came out, one in 1988 and the other in 1989, one largely uses sense and the other meaning for German Sinn. Thus, for the passages I quoted a moment ago, we read, in one, “the sense of the course of history” and “sense, purpose, and value” while in the other it is “the meaning of the historical process” and “meaning, purpose, and value.”1 I think it is safe to say that neither quite conveys Sinn in the original German, where it suggests something different from signifying as well as something different from sense, especially given Dilthey’s explicit association of Sinn with value and goal.

Possibly most relevant to a discussion of Tillich’s use and understanding of Sinn in the decade or so before he emigrated is a set of developments in German philosophy around the turn of the century. German theologian and philosopher of religion Ulrich Barth admirably tells the story of these developments, and their connection to Tillich’s early work, in an essay on the sinntheoretisch bases of the concept of religion.2 The story is complicated, and there is not adequate space here to retell it in detail. From late 1917 till July 1918, while he was serving on the front, Tillich carried on a correspondence with Protestant theologian Emanuel Hirsch, in which Tillich described the philosophical crisis he was undergoing and named the figures whose works were guiding the new direction he was taking. All this was by way of explaining the following statements (for the sake of simplicity I translate Sinn, and only Sinn, here as meaning): “Precisely this is now my way of

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thinking *[Meinung]*. Spiritual life is life in meaning or incessant creative meaning-giving. . . . The divine is meaning, not being. . . . I am therefore teaching the monism of meaning."23 The relevant figures, for our purposes, are Husserl and Emil Lask. At the risk of being reductive, one might tell the story like this: From the Husserl of *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900–1901), Tillich would have derived the notion of *Sinn* in connection both with linguistic signs and forms of expression, on the one hand, and with the intentional, act-based nature of cognition, on the other. In *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie* (1913), *Sinn* comes to be associated (though not precisely synonymous) with *noema*, which, for the sake of simplicity, we can define simply as the object-correlate of an act of cognition (the act constitutes *noesis*, and it is directed toward the *noema*). No matter what Husserl (not to mention Tillich) might have really understood by these concepts, we can safely say that *Sinn* has expanded its reach in such a way that it forms part of our very experience of the world. In Emil Lask, the *Sinnbegriff*, as Barth characterizes it, has attained the status of something fundamental, universal, and absolute. As he puts it, “Meaning [*Sinn*] is the universal medium of the understanding [*des Verstehens*] of the world.”24

Barth intended his essay to be merely preparatory to a future study of Tillich’s *Sinntheorie*, one that would include a focus on writings from the 1920s. Barth himself does not carry out this task, so we have no way of knowing how he might have explained the *Sinn* concept in those writings. For example, would the word *Sinn* consistently—or, for that matter, *ever*—signify “universal medium of the understanding of the world,” or would it function differently in different contexts? Be that as it may, in this sampling from Tillich’s precursors (including the German translator of Kierkegaard) and their use of German *Sinn* in connection with life, nature, human existence, the world, and similarly expansive notions, we can see that the word suggested a range of possible, often overlapping senses: a mysterious essence or truth symbolized by objects in the natural world or by the natural world itself; an overarching metaphysical truth; sense or direction; aim, goal, *telos*, purpose; perhaps grand understanding. It is when we get to Tillich’s immediate precursors, in the phenomenological and neo-Kantian strains of philosophy, that we truly run into problems with translating *Sinn* into English. If it is true, as Barth asserts, that *Sinn* has come to convey something as broad and, at the same time, vague as “the universal medium of the understanding of the world,” then we must attempt not only to construe the German word in this way, while deciding in which contexts the word carries this sense, but also to determine whether what is conveyed in the German word is carried over into English.

23 Barth truncated all three statements, with slightly misleading results. Originally from *EW*, 6:125–27.

24 Barth, *Religion*, 121.
Tillich in German

Even a quick perusal of Tillich’s early works in German will confirm the impression that the young scholar of philosophy and theology was obsessed with the notion—or collection of notions—expressed in the German word *Sinn*. In 1923, as a *Privatdozent* in Berlin, the 37-year-old Tillich wrote *Das System der Wissenschaften nach Gegenständen und Methoden* (The System of the sciences according to their objects and methods), in *Gesammelte Werke*. Here, *der Sinn* plays a foundational role in *understanding* (*Verstehen*). For the moment, I will leave the word *Sinn* untranslated: “Philosophy,” Tillich writes, “is the doctrine of *Sinn*-principles [*Sinnprinzipien*], i.e. of *Sinn*-giving [*sinngebenden*] functions and categories . . . *Sinn* functions [*Sinnfunktionen*] are those directional acts in which the mind-supporting form [*Gestalt*] carries out its relationship to reality in a valid fashion and thereby constructs a *Sinn*-ful reality [*eine sinnvolle Wirklichkeit*].” 25

This language, reminiscent of the Husserl-Lask nexus that Barth discusses, might convey that “universal medium,” or it might simply be an ornate way of saying that philosophy has as its function to “make sense” of the world.

That same year Tillich finished *Religionsphilosophie* (“Philosophy of Religion,” published two years later, in 1925). After a lengthy introductory section, the opening chapter of Part I is titled “Die Sinnelemente und ihre Relationen” (The *Sinn* elements and their relations). In the space of two-and-a-half pages, the word *Sinn*, alone and in compound words, occurs no fewer than 73 times. Consider, for example, this passage (again I leave *Sinn* untranslated):

> Every consciousness of *Sinn* [*Sinnbewußtsein*] comprises three elements: first, consciousness of *Sinn*-connection [*Sinnzusammenhang*], in which every individual *Sinn* exists and without which it would be *Sinn*-less [*sinnlos*]; second, consciousness of the *Sinn*-fulness [*Sinnhaftigkeit*] of the *Sinn*-connection [*Sinnzusammenhang*] and, together with it, of every individual *Sinn*, that is, the consciousness of an unconditional *Sinn* that is present in each individual *Sinn* [*Einzelsinn*]; third, consciousness of a requirement for every individual *Sinn* [*Einzelsinn*] to fulfill the unconditional *Sinn*. 26

One can begin to appreciate not just the difficulty of translating this passage but the difficulty of interpreting it, if we read how James Luther Adams, in his introduction to the English translation of this work, explained Tillich’s concept of meaning. Tillich’s philosophy of religion, Adams writes, “is a philosophy of meaning, and of relatedness to the Unconditional in terms of meaning.” What, then, is meaning? Meaning for Tillich “is threefold,” Adams explains. “It is an awareness of a universal interconnection of meaning, an awareness of the ultimate

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meaningfulness of the interconnection of meaning, and an awareness of a demand to fulfill, to be obedient to, the ultimate, unconditional meaning-reality.”

It would greatly understate the case to say that this is not helpful. For not only has Adams defined meaning in terms of meaning itself, he has not paused to tell us what meaning means when he invokes it to define . . . meaning itself. Given the centrality of meaning here and given that, as we have seen, English meaning and German Sinn function differently from each other, the reader can hardly help being more than a little confused.

But this is perhaps not Adams’s fault, for the German original, it must be said, does not readily yield to interpretation. Tillich begins the section in which these statements appear with this claim: “Every act of mind/spirit [Geist] is a Sinn act [Sinnakt].” He goes on to write about various theories of knowledge and about how all of them share the premise that “the mind/spirit [Geist] is always a carrying-out of Sinn [Sinnvollzug] and that-which-is-intended in the mind/spirit [das im Geist Gemeinte] is always Sinn-connection [Sinnzusammenhang].”

He writes about a “ground of Sinn” (Sinngrund), by which term he defines “the unconditionality of Sinn.” I would challenge anyone to offer an easily comprehensible explanation of the material in these pages.

Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that Barth’s “universal medium of the understanding of the world” is at play in the passages I have just quoted in translation. It might make sense to speak of “consciousness of Sinn” or “Sinn-connection,” if we are talking about an awareness of that medium or some notion of interconnectedness within, and thanks to, that medium. But what are we to understand by “individual Sinn,” “unconditional Sinn,” and “ground of Sinn”? If Sinn is a “universal medium,” then how can there be an individual one, why is “unconditional Sinn” not a redundancy, and how can there be a ground of something that already appears to be the ground (or “medium”) of all understanding? If “universal medium” is not what Sinn refers to in some or all of these instances, then what does it refer to? Is it something like the English meaning, as when Sinn refers to the meaning of a word—thus something that gets expressed? Is “individual Sinn,” as opposed to both “Sinn-connection” and “unconditional Sinn,” analogous to Dilthey’s Bedeutung as opposed to overarching Sinn? Or is Sinn a term for some sort of grand metaphysical quality that is never quite defined? What appears clear is that Sinn functions in more than one way in these passages and that substituting “universal medium” for each and every instance of it would make the passages even more difficult to interpret than they are to begin with. At the very least, if we assume that Sinn in each of the foregoing instances has something to do with understanding, we might hazard a guess that “individual Sinn” refers to individual acts of understanding (making sense) that form part of a nexus with other such acts—thus the “Sinn-connection.” And then “ground of Sinn” and “unconditional


28 GW, 1:318.
Sinn” would perhaps denote some sort of absolute by which all sense-making takes place. Is it a synonym for God? Tillich does not explicitly say.

At the end of the 1920s, Tillich collected a set of lectures and essays under the title Religiöse Verwirklichung (Religious realization). One essay in the collection stands out for a use of Sinn that appears to stray from Tillich’s practice in the writings I have just discussed. It is titled “Das religiöse Symbol” (The religious symbol), and it foreshadows the theory of symbols that Tillich will include in Dynamics of Faith (1957). The full details of the theory need not concern us for the moment. Tillich aims to show the symbolic nature of “the religious act,” by which he appears to mean an act of faith that apprehends God. But this act is modeled on the act by which we apprehend a symbol of any sort. “The inner act,” he writes, “that directs itself at the symbol intends [meint] not the symbol but the symbolized [das Symbolisierte] in it. At the same time, the symbolized itself can in turn be a symbol of a symbolized of higher order. Thus a written character can be called a symbol for the word and the word a symbol for the meaning [Sinn].” By way of further example, Tillich explains that devotion to the cross in Christianity is directed toward the crucifixion, devotion to which in turn is directed toward “the redeeming acting” of God, which in turn is “the symbolic expression for an experience of the unconditionally transcendent.”

In a later passage, Tillich shows that “God” is in a double sense the end of a “religious act,” which is fundamentally symbolic in character. “To be sure,” he writes, “the religious act intends [meint] what it intends [meint], namely, it intends [meint] God, but in the word God there wavers a duality: the unconditionally transcendent, ultimately intended [Letztgemeinte], and some sort of thought object with properties and actions.” In other words, the being that we conceive as possessing properties and carrying out actions is itself a symbol representing the ultimate.

The language here is clearly the language of signifying and representation. Sinn in the passage I quoted clearly refers to the thing recovered from a sign or symbol in an act of apprehension or interpretation. Worth noting is Tillich’s use of the verb meinen, “to mean,” “to intend,” “to have in mind,” which seldom shows up in his other writings having to do with Sinn. Tillich is clearly showing the human subject as the agent in what he describes as the symbolic religious act. God, whether “the ultimately intended” or “some sort of thought object,” is the object of an act carried out by a human subject. The verb meinen, cognate with the English to mean, has a human being as its subject and God as its object. I will return to this point later.


History has thrown us a rather odd curve in the case of Tillich. A common story about his career tells that in the decade before Tillich immigrated to the United States, his theological-philosophical thinking took a turn from *meaning* to *being*. After all, so the story goes, it was in the United States that he began to use such expressions as “the ground of being” and “being-itself” either as stand-ins or as actual replacements for *God*; and “began to use” these expressions not just for the obvious reason that these are English-language expressions and Tillich didn’t write in English before he left Germany, but also because he had not used even the German equivalents of these expressions when he was writing exclusively in his native language. There are two problems with this story. The first is that Tillich actually had used German equivalents beginning in the mid-1920s, during his time at the University of Marburg, though admittedly not as frequently as he would come to use the English expressions. The second is that the meaning-to-being story suggests that Tillich largely abandoned his earlier commitment to German *Sinn* in favor of concepts associated with being (*Sein* in German). Determining whether or not this is true is tricky, of course, because once Tillich starts writing in English he has no choice but to use an English word—almost always *meaning*—and we have to decide whether the English word is equivalent to the German, as *he had recently used the German word*, or whether it means something different. And, if we decide it does mean something different, is it because the English word *meaning* by itself carries a set of connotations distinct from those that German *Sinn* carries, or is it because Tillich had changed his mind about *Sinn*? Christian Danz, in fact, has suggested that the meaning-to-being story is unhelpful precisely because it eclipses the role that meaning would always play in Tillich’s philosophy. To be clear, Tillich had already moved in the direction of ontology in the decade before he immigrated to the United States, and ontology necessarily implies a focus on being, but, as Danz put it, Tillich, even in his ontological period, remained always “an Idealist, a philosopher of spirit and meaning.”

The question is, which *meaning*? If Tillich, from the time of his immigration to the end of his life, is going to use the English *meaning* almost as liberally as he had used *Sinn* in Germany, should we fill in the phrases “universal medium of the understanding of the world” or “individual act of understanding”? Or should we assume that (a) Tillich’s philosophy has changed and (b) he has adopted a word that he knows to be different from anything in his native language? Alternatively,

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31 The term *Seinsgrund* occurs immediately after Tillich’s Marburg years, in the *Dresden Dogmatics*, in a deleted passage: “Offenbarung ist weder Eingriff in Natur und Geschichte noch Schöpfung von Natur und Geschichte, sondern Aufbrechen des Seinsgrundes in den Formen von Natur und Geschichte” (Revelation is neither intervention in nature and history nor creation from nature and history but a breaking open of the ground of being in the forms of nature and history). Paul Tillich, *Dogmatik-Vorlesung (Dresden 1925–1927)*, in *EW*, 14:29 n. 1. Thanks to Russell Re Manning for pointing me to this passage.

might the English word, different as it is from the German equivalent, have pushed an unwitting Tillich’s thinking in a direction it might not have taken had he never come to write in English?

He must surely have figured out that, unlike the German Sinn, English meaning carries the idea of intention, allowing us to use the word in connection with a subject, whether or not that subject is a human being. As a verbal noun, meaning affords the possibility that a sentence containing it may be rephrased (admittedly with a possible semantic change) with a finite verb: “X means Y.” This in turn makes it possible to cast the thing that possesses a meaning as the subject of a sentence, giving it agency. I stated earlier that meaning in English is far less likely than Sinn in German to suggest direction. And while meaningless and senseless can be used synonymously, the latter is much more likely than the former to suggest simple incomprehensibility or illogicality, while meaningless is much more likely to suggest the absence of something more difficult to define and express than the sense in senseless. In German, there is only sinnlos. In addition, in instances where meaning and to mean carry the idea of intention, will it simply substitute for the German meinen? As we just saw, Tillich almost always makes a human being the grammatical subject of meinen. This will not be true of Tillich’s use of the English meaning/to mean, which will almost always be associated with something external to the human subject.

After Tillich arrives in his new homeland, it will be some time before he publishes work—in English, of course—that can accurately be characterized as representing substantive thinking that he did in the United States. The Interpretation of History (1936), Tillich’s first book published in English, presents an “autobiographical sketch” (written in German and translated into English) that includes some material about the author’s encounter with existential philosophy.33 The remainder of the book consists of pre-exile material translated into English. The Protestant Era (1948) is a collection of short pieces, some dating back to Tillich’s German period (and translated into English), others on a variety of relatively narrow topics. It is only with the publication of volume 1 of Systematic Theology that we really see the Tillich who will become known in both academic and popular circles among English-speaking readers.

Anyone versed in both German and English who had followed Tillich’s career in German and now picked up the new work in 1951 would have been immediately struck by a major shift—and not simply because the new work was in English. Even if one were to translate Tillich’s English “back” into German (something that in fact was done in Germany for each volume of Systematic Theology within five years of its publication), one would see that the language was not what it had been in the 1920s and early 1930s. The “move to ontology” that scholars speak about (admittedly with a healthy dose of simplification) makes itself felt in the very premises that Tillich establishes in the opening pages of this central theological work.

33 Tillich, Interpretation of History, 39–41.
First, “ultimate concern,” as a concept, was not new for Tillich, and the German translators rendered it back into the author’s native language using a version of the phrase that Tillich had used earlier: “das, was uns unbedingt angeht” (that which unconditionally concerns us). What is new is not only the English expression—not entirely identical to the German both because of the word *ultimate* and because the German verb *angehen* has become the English noun *concern*—but, above all, how the concept is framed. Tillich quickly takes us from the somewhat surprising claim that ultimate concern is an “abstract translation” of the “great commandment” (“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might,” Deuteronomy 6:4–5, Mark 12:29–30), through the claim that the concern of which he speaks is “ultimate, unconditional, total, and infinite,” to this statement: “Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or not-being for us.”

So, what about the term *being*? It “does not designate existence in time and space,” Tillich writes, “but the term ‘being’ means the whole of human reality, the structure, the meaning, and the aim of existence. All this is threatened; it can be lost or saved. Man is ultimately concerned about his being and meaning.” Before too long, since he is, after all, writing a work of theology, Tillich comes to ask what the difference is between philosophy and theology. His answer: “Philosophy deals with the structure of being in itself; theology deals with the meaning of being for us.” Not long after this, we have a statement that joins together the threads of the “existential” theology that Tillich will set forth for the next almost nine hundred pages. At issue here is the “New Being,” as the object of the theologian’s quest. The New Being turns out to be another name for Jesus, just as “ground of being” and “being-itself” will be alternate names for God, but they will be alternate names because the expressions *Jesus Christ* and *God*, all alone, by appearing to denote external objects, are misleading. So instead, in the case of Jesus, we say “Jesus as the Christ,” therefore remaining agnostic on the historical reality and divine paternity of the more conventional Jesus. Just as God is the ground of being, Jesus is “the New Being in Jesus as the Christ as our ultimate concern.”

So, for now, the question is this: if we are speaking about being, the structure of being, the New Being, the ground of being, and being-itself, and if “theology deals with the meaning of being,” then in what sense is Tillich using the English word *meaning* here? Can the question, “What is the meaning of being?,” be rephrased as, “What does *being* mean?” If so, then, assuming that “the meaning of being” does not refer to the dictionary definition of the word *being*, the answer would simply

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34 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:11–14 [italics in original].
36 Ibid., 1:22.
37 Ibid., 1:50.
consist in an explanation of the concept of being and would not suggest something as grand as “universal medium of understanding.” But a few sentences earlier Tillich has said that “man is ultimately concerned about his being and meaning,” that is, not the meaning of being, but meaning as a separate thing to be concerned about.38

At the end of a section titled “Being and the Question of God,” Tillich introduces yet another distinction, this time between “the teleological argument” and “the cosmological argument” for the existence of God. The former has to do with what Tillich terms the “ground of meaning,” since the telos in teleology is “the ‘inner aim,’ the meaningful, understandable structure of reality.”39 Tillich now brings up the Kierkegaardian/existentialist notion of anxiety. “Anxiety about meaninglessness,” he writes,

is the characteristically human form of ontological anxiety. It is the form of anxiety which only a being can have in whose nature freedom and destiny are united. The threat of losing this unity drives man toward the question of an infinite, unthreatened ground of meaning; it drives him to the question of God. The teleological argument formulates the question of the ground of meaning, just as the cosmological argument formulates the question of the ground of being.40

What, then, does meaning mean here? There is a “ground of meaning,” and there is a “ground of being.” The former is placed in apposition to “God,” suggesting that, like “ground of being,” it can fill in for “God.”

The allusion to anxiety provides a clue. If Tillich had been speaking solely about Kierkegaard, anxiety would have been associated with the notion of finitude and, by extension, nonbeing. Kierkegaard never spoke of “anxiety about meaninglessness.” The philosopher who allegedly had done so, however, is named earlier in the same section: Jean-Paul Sartre. “Sartre,” Tillich wrote, “includes in nonbeing not only the threat of nothingness but also the threat of meaninglessness (i.e., the destruction of the structure of being).”41 What is Tillich referring to? The only hint of a reference to an actual work by Sartre in Systematic Theology is in volume 2, where Tillich uses the phrase “no exit” (Sartre’s play, Huis clos, had been translated into English as No Exit as early as 1946).42 In The Courage to Be, published the year after volume 1 of Systematic Theology, Tillich mentions, once again, No Exit and briefly refers to Sartre’s novel The Age of Reason (translated into English in 1947).43 In neither of these works is there anything that might be rendered in English as “the threat of meaninglessness,” though both contain passages with references to meaning (lensens) in connection with life. Moreover, both in The Courage to Be and in volume

38 Ibid., 1:14.
40 Ibid., 1:210.
41 Ibid., 1:189.
42 Ibid., 2:75.
3 of Systematic Theology, Tillich offers a discussion of Sartre, in connection with Heidegger, in which he refers to concepts clearly not drawn from the French philosopher’s literary compositions: from the former work, a proposition that Tillich renders as “the essence of man is his existence” and, from the latter, “Sartre’s assertion of the mutual objectivation of human beings in all of their encounters.”

The source of the comment about “the threat of nothingness” and “the threat of meaninglessness” could hardly be anything other than l’Être et le néant (Being and Nothingness), published in French in 1943. It first came out in German translation in 1952 and in the English translation by Hazel E. Barnes in 1956. Did Tillich read this work in French? Did he read reviews of it? Did he perhaps only hear it talked about?

Being and Nothingness contains passages that at least appear to address the topic that Tillich hints at in his brief comment. First, anxiety (angoisse, which Barnes translated into English as anguish): in a chapter on “The Origin of Nothingness,” Sartre writes of anxiety and of Kierkegaard. “It is in anxiety that man becomes conscious of his freedom, or, if one prefers, anxiety is the mode of being of freedom as consciousness of being; it is in anxiety that freedom, in its being, is in question for itself.”\(^4\) Freedom, in turn, is tied to values: “It follows that my freedom is the sole foundation of values and that nothing, absolutely nothing justifies my adopting this or that value, this or that scale of values . . . And my freedom suffers anxiety from being the foundation, without foundation, of these values.”\(^5\) As for meaning, Sartre primarily used the word sens, but in one of the most extended passages on the topic, he used both sens and signification, without troubling to explain the distinction. Either way, the words are inextricably tied to freedom and to life. For example: “If this is the case, we can no longer even say that death confers a meaning \([sens]\) on life from outside; a meaning \([sens]\) can come only from subjectivity itself. Since death does not appear at the foundation of our freedom, it can only remove all meaning \([signification]\) from life.”\(^6\) “Thus death is never what gives its meaning \([sens]\) to life; on the contrary, it is what on principle removes all meaning \([signification]\) from it.”\(^7\) The word sens frequently occurs together with valeur (value), as though the two words were inextricably linked.

Whatever the source of Tillich’s knowledge of Sartre, the brief passage that refers to him is evidence of a shift in the sense of meaning. The moment we begin to hear about meaninglessness in connection with nonbeing and nothingness, we are entering the realm where meaning is defined at the outset through the idea of negation, as something missing that renders life both incomprehensible (in French, “La vie n’a point de sens,” means, “Life makes no sense” or “I don’t understand

\(^4\) Tillich, Courage to Be, 149; Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3:261.
\(^5\) Jean-Paul Sartre, L’Être et le néant (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) 66.
\(^6\) Ibid., 76.
\(^7\) Ibid., 623.
\(^8\) Ibid., 624.
life”) and, what follows as a corollary, without value (“La vie ne vaut pas la peine d’être vécue,” means, “Life is not worth living”). Because of the nature of the French word sens, the negative statement that life lacks it does not automatically raise the question of what sens would mean in an affirmative statement in which life is said to have it. But if, when life lacks sens, we find ourselves plunged into the absurd and therefore, out of a desperate desire to escape that condition, impelled to seek sens, then we find ourselves under the necessity of supplying a positive content for this term or, rather, for meaning, the English equivalent that Tillich used. So, what is that content? In this context, the idealist “universal medium of the understanding of the world” and the other meanings that the German Sinn appeared to have do not really fit anymore.

The issue comes into full relief in The Courage to Be (1952). This book, written for a popular readership, brought meaning into an adapted existentialist nexus with anxiety, ultimate concern, faith, being, and freedom. As in Sartre and Camus (both briefly mentioned in this book), the notion of meaning arises from its negative. Early in the book, Tillich distinguishes among three types of anxiety, one of which is “the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness.” “We use the term meaninglessness,” Tillich explains,

for the absolute threat of nonbeing to spiritual self-affirmation. . . . The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. . . . Anxiously one turns away from all concrete contents and looks for an ultimate meaning, only to discover that it was precisely the loss of a spiritual center which took away the meaning from the special contents of the spiritual life. . . . The anxiety of emptiness drives us to the abyss of meaninglessness. . . . Man’s being includes his relation to meanings. He is human only by understanding and shaping reality, both his world and himself, according to meanings and values.49

Thus, as “meaninglessness” is placed in apposition to “loss of an ultimate concern,” “meaning” and “ultimate concern” come to be equivalents, together with “meaning which gives meaning to all meanings” and “ultimate meaning.” Ultimate, which till now in Tillich had chiefly modified concern, has now come to modify meaning, and “ultimate meaning” appears to be yet another substitute expression for God.

At the end of The Courage to Be, Tillich takes up two notions that we would never find in Sartre or Camus: absolute faith and God. He has remained true to his adapted existentialist framework. The logic—though Tillich does not follow the order of this logic in his presentation—appears to be this: (1) “the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness” threatens us with loss of the meaning of life;50 (2) this

49 Tillich, Courage to Be, 46–50.
50 Ibid., 174.
loss can interrupt our “quest for the courage to be”;\(^{51}\) (3) beyond simple being, there is being-itself;\(^{52}\) (4) we reach being-itself via faith, defined as “the state of being grasped by the power of being itself”;\(^{53}\) (5) being is connected with meaning, because, paradoxically, we must first accept nonbeing and meaninglessness in order to experience being and meaning;\(^{54}\) (6) in the end, having accepted nonbeing and meaninglessness as a path to being and meaning, we reach a stage, via “absolute faith,” where we transcend “the theistic idea of God” and arrive at “God above the God of theism.”\(^{55}\) And \textit{meaning} is there to the very end. The old God, “the God of theism,” disappears in the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness, so that the new God, presumably the God of meaning, can appear. It is in that new God that the titular “courage to be” is rooted, as Tillich explains in the final sentence of the book.

But what is this meaning? If it is the thing that is missing in \textit{meaninglessness}, then once we transcend meaninglessness, we should find \textit{meaning}. And since, when we transcend meaninglessness, we find the new God, finding the new God and finding \textit{meaning} should be roughly the same thing. So, this \textit{meaning} can’t be the \textit{Sinn} of Tillich’s earlier days, because (a) that \textit{Sinn} (often signifying “universal medium of the understanding of the world”) was centered in the subject and the subject’s understanding (sense-finding) and (b) it did not unequivocally appear as a totalizing quality equivalent to God. Then what is it? Is it always the same thing, even in this book, \textit{The Courage to Be}?

Even if we exclude instances of the word \textit{meaning} that are clearly not relevant to this discussion, we can easily see that it is not consistently used in the same sense even within \textit{The Courage to Be}. For example, at one point Tillich returns to his Husserlian roots and speaks of intentionality. “We have defined intentionality as ‘being directed toward meaningful contents,’” he writes. “Man lives ‘in’ meanings, in that which is valid logically, esthetically, ethically, religiously.”\(^{56}\) Then, in a chapter titled “Self and Participation (The Courage to Be as a Part),” where the topic is the life of the self in a collective or community, Tillich brings up \textit{language} and why it is essential to the self that belongs to a community. “Without language,” he writes, “there are no universals; without universals no transcending of nature and no relation to it as nature. But language is communal, not individual. The section of reality in which one participates immediately is the community to which one belongs.”\(^{57}\) “Truth and meaning,” he writes a few pages later (admittedly without explicitly mentioning language), “are embodied in the traditions and symbols of the group.”\(^{58}\) \textit{Meaning} in these passages is not the same as in the ones I mentioned

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 174.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 172.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 172.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 176–77.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 186–88.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 81–82.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 91.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 93.
a moment ago. In its plural (“man lives ‘in’ meanings”), it suggests a world alive with signs and symbols that wink at us as we pass through (a bit like the “forests of symbols” that Baudelaire described in his famous sonnet Correspondances). If the topic is language, then we are explicitly talking about meaning in the fairly ordinary sense having to do with signification and communication. When we speak of intentionality in a Husserlian sense, we might be using meaning in the sense of “intending,” like the German meinen, but Tillich sticks to the word intentionality as something “directed toward meaningful contents,” and thus in English, meaning continues to represent something external to the human subject.

So the question is who or what is doing the intending and the meaning, that is, carrying out the action of the verbs to intend and to mean, even in the various different senses of meaning. We cannot be absolutely certain that the meanings in which we live are initiating the interaction with us who pass through. But what about “ultimate meaning”? At the end of The Courage to Be, it becomes clear that a change has taken place in the relationship between the believer and the unconditional absolute that now goes by several names, among which are God, “meaning which gives meaning to all meanings,” and “ultimate meaning.” The faculty or power that governs that relationship, of course, is faith.

But first, what was the status of faith in the earlier, German period? Here is how Tillich defined it in Religionsphilosophie:

Faith is the turning toward the unconditional that is operative in all functions of the mind/spirit . . . it is the grasping of the unconditional, a grasping that grounds in like manner the theoretical and the practical . . . faith is directedness toward the unconditional in theoretical and practical acts; the unconditional as such, however, can never be an object, only the symbol can, in which the unconditional is intuited and willed [gewollt]. Faith is directedness toward the unconditional via symbols that come from the [realm of the] conditional. Every act of faith thus has a double sense: it is directed without mediation at a holy object, and yet it intends [meint] not that object but the unconditional that is symbolically expressed in the object.59

And here is what he had to say about God, with respect to faith:

God is the object intended [gemeint] in faith and, apart from that, nothing else. This does not, however, signify that the object is made into a product of the [human] subject or that God is made into a creation of faith. Rather it is through its directedness toward the unconditional that faith is determined as faith. . . . But the act that grasps the unconditional is a faith act, and apart from it, the unconditional is not grasparable.60

Here, with the possible exception of “directedness toward,” the human subject is the originator of all actions connected with faith: turning toward, grasping, intuiting, willing, intending. This certainly seems like classic epistemological dualism, in

59 GW, 1:331–32.
60 Ibid., 1:333.
which the human subject seeks to bridge a gap on the other side of which lies an object, in this case God. And this despite the claim Tillich has made a few pages earlier that, in what he calls the metalogical method, there is no dualism, that the religious act and the object of that act are identical. “The question of the truth of religion is answered by means of the metalogical construal [Erfassung] of religion as directedness toward unconditional meaning [Sinn],” he wrote. Because the question whether the unconditional exists already presupposes the existence of the unconditional, Tillich argued, directedness toward that unconditional cannot be treated as dualistic. And yet, only a few pages later, Tillich is defining God as an intended object. Whether or not one buys the argument that this view is not dualistic, it is difficult to deny that the human subject is the agent in this model.

Now compare how Tillich elaborates on the conception of faith at the end of *The Courage to Be*:

> Faith is not a theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, it is the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience. Faith is not an opinion but a state. It is the state of being grasped by the power of being which transcends everything that is and in which everything that is participates. He who is grasped by this power is able to affirm himself because he knows that he is affirmed by the power of being-itself. In this point mystical experience and personal encounter are identical. In both of them faith is the basis of the courage to be.

The language that Tillich now uses to describe and explain faith is characterized by passive verbs: “being grasped,” “is grasped,” “is affirmed.” Faith now appears as a state or condition in which the person of faith receives the action of an outside force. That outside force in this passage is named “the power of being-itself,” another expression for God. God is thus no longer the object of an act of faith, as he had been in the period of *Religionsphilosophie*. Instead, God is now another name for the power that grasps the person of faith. The state or condition of being grasped somehow leads to freedom and the courage to be (terms suggesting agency), but “the power of being-itself” does the grasping, and the person of faith gets grasped, only after which that person is able to affirm. If one of the other names for the outside force includes the word meaning (“meaning which gives meaning to all meanings,” and “ultimate meaning”), then we can say that English allows that force to function as a force that does something. *It* grasps me; *I* don’t grasp *it*. *It* acts. *It* means something to me. One cannot convey this with the German Sinn.

By the time Tillich wrote *Dynamics of Faith* (1957), the relation between faith and human beings had fully settled in. “An act of faith,” wrote Tillich, “is an act of a finite being who is grasped by and turned to the infinite.” This act follows the being-grasped-and-turned. Revelation? It is “the experience in which an ultimate

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61 Ibid., 1:327.
concern grasps the human mind and creates a community in which this concern expresses itself in symbols of action, imagination, and thought.”

And what do symbols, that is, bearers of meaning, do? Here is where Tillich gave the best-known English-language account of his theory of symbols (though he included abridged accounts in numerous other writings from his American period). Symbols of any sort bear six characteristics. (1) They “point beyond themselves to something else.” (2) A symbol “participates in that to which it points.” (3) A symbol “opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us.” (4) A symbol “unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality.” (5) “Symbols cannot be produced intentionally.” (6) Symbols “cannot be invented.”

Whatever the merits of this preliminary account, one can say that Tillich, without expressly using the word meaning, is speaking of a form of signification: symbols “point beyond themselves to something else.”

But if we are focused on the use of the word meaning and the verb to mean, we see that the discussion quickly becomes confusing. “Whatever we say about that which concerns us ultimately,” Tillich writes, “whether or not we call it God, has a symbolic meaning. It points beyond itself while participating in that to which it points.” To what does it point? Ultimate concern? God? Are they the same? “The fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God,” Tillich then writes. “Ultimate concern cannot deny its own character as ultimate. Therefore, it affirms what is meant by the word ‘God.’” Now, however, we are speaking of the word God and what it means, or points to, in its signifying function, but presumably we are not speaking of God, that is, what the word God means, or points to. Tillich then moves to speak about God by referring to atheism, which, in denying God, he writes, “can only mean the attempt to remove any ultimate concern—to remain unconcerned about the meaning of one’s existence.” But this is not the same meaning as in the phrase “symbolic meaning”; this is something grander, something metaphysical but undefined. Thus meaning (and to mean) in this brief passage alone carries more than one sense. (1) Religious symbols appear to mean, that is, to point to the ultimate, namely God. (2) But God is a symbol and thus must point to, or mean, something ultimate. (3) Another equivalent for “ultimate concern” is “the meaning of one’s existence,” where meaning no longer has to do with symbolic pointing but clearly serves as an equivalent to “ultimate concern.”

A few years earlier Tillich had given a lecture at the Jewish Theological Seminary titled “Theology and Symbolism,” in which he traced out a path similar to the one we find in Dynamics of Faith. The path is from meaning, as denoting the thing to which a symbol points, in virtue of its function as a symbol, to meaning more metaphysically construed, to meaning as synonymous (or virtually synonymous) with God. Even the following sentence shows a shift: “The symbol opens up a level

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64 Ibid., 78.
65 Ibid., 41–43.
66 Ibid., 45.
of meaning which otherwise is closed. It opens up a stratum of reality, of meaning and being which otherwise we could not reach.”

The first meaning technically denotes what a symbol points to. The second has begun to be conflated with being and has taken on a slightly different status. Religious symbols, Tillich continues, “have a limited meaning, they have a conditioned validity; but they are used in order to point beyond themselves to that which has unconditional, unlimited, and infinite meaning.”

A religious symbol “is material taken out of the world of finite things, to point beyond itself to the ground of being and meaning, to being itself and meaning itself. As a symbol, it participates in the power of the ultimate to which it points,” otherwise known as the “holy.” At the end of this path, we find the symbol exercising its function as a meaning object (an object that carries out the action of the verb to mean) by pointing to the ultimate. Thus “the God of theism,” that is, the vulgar God of common belief, is “a symbol for the God beyond the God of theism.”

That God (the God beyond) is “the ground of being and meaning.” So, the God of theism, in his symbolic, pointing function, points to his (technically defined) meaning, the thing we recover through an act of interpretation when we encounter a symbol. But in this case, the thing recovered is “the ground of meaning.” And yet this meaning cannot possibly be the same as the technically defined meaning (in the sense of pointing or thing-pointed-to), nor can it even be a kind of pure, ultimate version of that meaning. It has a different status altogether, something undefined but closely connected with being.

How is this important to Tillich’s new conception of faith? In the new conception, the external, unconditional, absolute is the agent. There are many expressions for this absolute, but among them are the word meaning and phrases including the word meaning. As a verbal noun, the English word is a much better vehicle for the notion of agency than the German Sinn.

This relationship that faith brings about finds its full realization in volume 3 of Systematic Theology, published six years after Dynamics of Faith. Tillich introduces a distinction between human spirit (lowercase s) and divine Spirit (uppercase S), also called “Spiritual Presence,” which he defines in one place as “the actualization of power and meaning in unity.” Once again, the outside force is the agent that acts on us. “Man in his self-transcendence,” Tillich writes of Spiritual Presence, “can reach for it, but man cannot grasp it, unless he is first grasped by it.” Being grasped by Spiritual Presence is called “ecstasy,” which Tillich had understood, in Dynamics of Faith, in the root Greek sense (ἔκστασις) of “standing outside of

68 Ibid., 110.
69 Ibid., 110.
70 Ibid., 114.
71 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3:111.
72 Ibid., 3:112.
oneself.”73 And meaning is predictably not far behind. The Spiritual Presence is “a meaning-bearing power which grasps the human spirit in an ecstatic experience.”74 Once again, faith is a state of being grasped. “Faith, formally or generally defined, is the state of being grasped by that toward which self-transcendence aspires, the ultimate in being and meaning. In a short formula, one can say that faith is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.”75 Faith is thus “not an act of cognitive affirmation within the subject-object structure of reality,” not a “will to believe.”76 Gone is the dualism of Religionsphilosophie, gone, therefore, is faith as directedness toward something, and gone is God as an object. And if meaning steps out as something closely associated, if not synonymous, with the unconditional absolute (or God), then it is in large part because Tillich is now writing in English. The German Sinn, given its grammatical status as a noun, given its connection to sensory experience, and therefore to a dualist religious epistemology in which God is an object, would not really fit. Sinn has no intrinsic agency; meaning does.

These reflections on Tillich’s conception of faith leave us with a perplexing puzzle. Did Tillich change his mind about faith for reasons independent of his having been obliged to adopt English as his new scholarly language? If so, then we might say it was a happy coincidence that, in his adopted language, the word most closely equivalent to German Sinn afforded him an easy way to articulate his new conception of faith. An alternative hypothesis is that Tillich’s thinking, perhaps without his even realizing it, was moved in a new direction by his adopted language, specifically by the grammatical properties of the English word meaning. This is an intriguing possibility, with enormous negative implications for any idea that theological thinking can somehow cross linguistic boundaries and arise independently of the peculiar properties of the language in which a given theologian thinks and writes. As central and essential a notion as faith, together with the critical question whether the human subject is active or passive in relation to it, would by this hypothesis be subject to the grammatical vagaries of the language in which the notion is contemplated and articulated. Theology would then become “God-talk” only in a particular idiom.

Sadly, the biographical record, to the best of my knowledge, does not provide a definitive solution to the puzzle in the case of Tillich. Christian Danz, in a lengthy history of the project by which Systematic Theology was translated into German, included a brief description of Tillich’s composition practices in English. These practices included Tillich’s faltering attempts to come up with proper English words and expressions, which were then unsystematically vetted by American assistants, and his initial use of German words and expressions, which were

73 Ibid., 3:112; Dynamics of Faith, 7.
74 Tillich, Systematic Theology, 3:115.
75 Ibid., 3:130.
76 Ibid., 3:131–32.
then unsystematically translated by his assistants. In the end, both because the information is inconclusive and above all because one realizes that these composition practices were so disorderly, it is difficult to arrive at a judgment about the nature of the process by which Tillich formulated his thoughts when he expressed them in English. There can be no doubt, however, that the English language provided a hospitable medium for the new conception of faith. One might safely say that the path to that conception would have been, if not blocked, then far less smooth in German.

**Conclusion**

The concept of *meaning*, as expressed by the German *Sinn* and by the English *meaning*, accrues a considerable number of senses over Tillich’s career as a philosopher and theologian. The group comprised in the German *Sinn* is different from that comprised in the English *meaning*, though there is some overlap. There is overlap, too, among the senses comprised in each—in the German, on one side, and in the English, on the other. Many senses are difficult to pin down with any reasonable degree of precision, and, as we have seen, Tillich wrote passages containing several instances of the German word or the English word in which that word appeared to shift semantically from sentence to sentence (or even within a single sentence). In German, we saw that before the time of Tillich, *der Sinn* was used to carry (among others) the following senses (apart from the ordinary “meaning,” as of a word): a mysterious essence or truth symbolized by objects in the natural world or by the natural world itself; an overarching metaphysical truth; “sense” or “direction”; “aim,” “goal,” “telos,” “purpose.” In Tillich’s work, *der Sinn* accrued the following meanings (among others): “the universal medium of the understanding of the world” (Ulrich Barth’s formulation); “sense,” as in “making sense,” what is missing in “senseless” (*sinnlos*); “the unconditional” (“das Unbedingte”); “thing pointed at” (in Tillich’s theory of symbols and signs); a grand metaphysical quality of some undefined sort; the object-correlate of an act of cognition; and “God.”

In his English writings Tillich used *meaning* in the following senses (among others): the nexus of “comprehensibility,” “value,” “direction,” from existential philosophy (what is missing when life is *meaningless*); “ultimate concern” (the “meaning which gives meaning to all meanings”); in the plural, something undefined that man “lives in”; the thing that grasps us when we are in the state of faith; and “God.” There can be no doubt that the German *Sinn* lives on to a certain extent in Tillich’s English-language writings, particularly in instances where *meaning* conveys something broadly metaphysical and fairly vague. At the same time, it must certainly be true that, in the language he adopted relatively late in life, Tillich

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sensed the difference in the way the word *meaning* functions. In part this was owing to the rise of existential philosophy during and immediately after World War II, when Tillich was already living in the United States and receiving information in English. In part, too, it was owing to a set of senses that *meaning* had accrued in English independently of existential philosophy—in the popular press, for example. But above all it must have been because English *meaning* was a match for the new conception of faith (and might possibly have pushed him toward that conception), as one of the agents that carry out the action of *grasping* us when we are under its influence.