

# What Does It All Mean?

‘Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.’

– Immanuel Kant, Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason*

I take as my title a question that outlines the modest theme I will pursue: the nature of meaning itself. Like many philosophers, I am fond of titles that are questions – or, at least, of titles that end with question marks, which is not always the same thing. A colleague of mine was once advised that everything in his book called *The End of Metaphysics* could be rendered true, or anyway less false, if he added a question mark to the end of it. The end of metaphysics? Could be, could be. In fact, why not? But we have to be careful with those face-saving question marks, because they can look like a failure of nerve – the functional equivalent of a scholarly book’s subtitle, which, broken over the crisis of faith symbolized by the two-story full stop of a colon, tempers the enthusiasm of a bold, snappy title with some dull, informative, back-peddalling phrase. You know the kind of thing I mean. Title: *A Civil Tongue*. Subtitle: *Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism*. (That one is mine.)

The question at hand, you’ll notice, has not been weakened