

Singing the World in a New Key: Merleau-Ponty and the Ontology of Sense

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To what extent can meaning be attributed to nature, and what is the relationship between such “natural sense” and the meaning of linguistic and artistic expressions? To shed light on such questions, this essay lays the groundwork for an “ontology of sense” drawing on the insights of phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression. We argue that the ontological continuity of organic life with the perceived world of nature requires situating sense at a level that is more fundamental than has traditionally been recognized. Accounting for the genesis of this primordial sense and the teleology of expressive forms requires the development of an ontology of being as interrogation, as suggested by Merleau-Ponty’s later investigations.

The relation between nature and language may seem, at first glance, to be of merely regional philosophical interest, relevant primarily to theories of expression and perhaps to environmental philosophy.¹ But a little reflection reveals that the relation between nature and language is pivotal for virtually all of continental philosophy in this century. Derrida has argued quite famously that the entire problematic of phenomenology flows from Husserl’s differentiation, in the opening pages of the *Logical Investigations*, between “natural” indication and linguistic signification.² The relation between the natural and phenomenological attitudes, then, is bound up with the distinction—a juridical distinction, Derrida argues, that cannot finally be maintained in any pure way—between natural signs and gestures, on the one hand, and the iterability of ideal significations on the other. Nature versus language. Or consider Merleau-Ponty’s analysis in *The Prose of the World* of the painstaking emergence of linguistic sense, and ultimately the abstract languages and concepts of science and mathematics, from our embodied perceptual dialogue with the world, that is, the gradual blossoming of linguistic signification from our inherence in the substratum of natural meaning.³ Nature giving rise to language. Or, once again, consider Foucault’s archeology of the human sciences in *The Order of Things*, a work that traces the very appearance of the modern conception of man and of the contrast between “nature” and “human nature” to a transformation of language: the discourse of representation that subtended the Classical

episteme, with its continuity between words and things, is replaced by an analytic of finitude according to which “man” first conceives of himself as “a being whose nature . . . is to know nature.”⁴ What was once a continuity of language with nature . . . transforms into a discontinuity. And, to take one last example, consider Deleuze’s analyses in *The Logic of Sense* that treat sense as the hinge between things and propositions, as a pure event or surface effect that is neither physical nor mental, but that makes signification possible precisely by distinguishing itself purely from the “edible nature” of bodies.⁵ Sense, as neither nature nor language, operates as a kind of slippery surface between the two. Crucial for each of these four positions is precisely the relation between nature and language, or rather the mediations, effects, and strata that traverse this relation. An analysis of the development of continental thought in the twentieth century could perhaps be developed around this motif.

The present essay is concerned, however, with the systematic and methodological issues raised by this relation rather than its historical development. The recurring thread in the relation of nature and language for the four philosophers mentioned above is the concept of noema or sense.⁶ Our concern therefore is with the ontological status of sense: is sense “natural,” and if so, what is its relation with linguistic meaning? It is valuable to remember here that the French word *sens* and the German *Sinn* signify not only “meaning” but also “direction.” To ask whether nature has a sense, therefore, is also to ask whether it has a direction, a *telos*. The examination of nature’s sense has implications then for a metaphysics of nature and the problem of teleology.⁷ Our examination will proceed by first considering the dilemma that phenomenology faces in its analysis of sense, specifically in its attempt to situate sense with respect to subjectivity. We will then evaluate attempts to bypass this dilemma using the concepts of life and style suggested by Merleau-Ponty, taking into account Foucault’s criticisms of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of expression. Consideration of the ontological continuity of life and nature will lead us, next, to recognize the dimension of sense as more primordial than subjectivity and the emergence of meaning in language as an operation derivative from this more fundamental dimension of sense. We conclude with the suggestion that further exploration of the ontology of sense take as its point of departure Merleau-Ponty’s investigations of interrogation as a fundamental ontological operation.

The first stage of our investigation of the ontology of sense concerns the contributions of phenomenology. Consider the classic example of the

perception of a tree. Our perceiving intends a certain object, the tree. But here constitutive phenomenology will distinguish between the tree as a transcendent thing and the tree-sense, the noema, that serves as the object-pole of my intentional act. This sense is ideal, that is, iterable: what I see is a tree, just as I have seen trees before and can see them again, just as you and I can see this same tree at the same time. This ideal noema is open for my inspection, indeed is implied by my noetic act, and is therefore present to consciousness. Rather than finding the noema to be on the side of nature, along with the transcendent tree, we find it on the side of the subject, as the object pole of the subject's intentional relation. It follows that sense is not in nature but in the subject. Its iterability situates it on the side of ideality, or language, not on the side of indication or natural relations. Here, then, we can draw a sharp distinction between causality, as a relation within nature, and intentionality, as a relation of sense.

On the other hand, our example is of a perceptual encounter, a seeing of the tree, and this seeing is inherently corporeal. In order to make out the tree as a tree, my eyes must be capable of focusing on it, of selecting and making explicit what they find implicit in the visual panorama. Perception involves selection and stylization—not only spatial but also temporal⁸—and yet I cannot make myself see a tree where none exists. So, “something” in the world must lead my eyes toward the focus that they achieve: an emerging sense, a natural telos. My body is as much passive as active in the exchange that gives rise to the emergence of the sense “tree.” The sense is neither “out there” waiting to be picked up like a lost coin, nor is it something my body fabricates *tout seul*; rather, sense arises *à deux*. Sense is therefore autochthonous, rooted in a corporeal exchange with the world.

We arrive, then, at the classical dilemma sense poses for phenomenology: is sense to be situated on the side of the subject, as the very principles of phenomenology seem to imply, or is sense in some way bestowed on us by the world, as a phenomenological investigation of our corporeality has been led to conclude? This latter position, that our embodied dialogue with nature gives rise to sense, has received considerable attention from ecological theorists over the last several years due to the efforts of David Abram, who himself builds on the foundation laid down by the earlier work of Merleau-Ponty.⁹ According to this position, sense arises at the conjunction of the world and the embodied subject and lies at the root of human expression and language. Although Merleau-Ponty usually discusses the human subject, it is clear that this description may be extended to animal life as

well.¹⁰ Rather than to the world-subject conjunction, sense would be more accurately attributed to the meeting point of world and *life*. All life carries with it an evaluative projecting into the world. As Hans Jonas puts the point, metabolism is the “first form of freedom.”¹¹ Life values and chooses; it throws a world up before itself and is therefore already intentionally engaged rather than merely causally connected. Life and sense go hand in hand.

For Merleau-Ponty, there is a clear relation of continuity between sense, at this root level of world and life interaction, and specifically human levels of expression such as language. Sense is transferred from nature to language through the medium of the body. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, for example, Merleau-Ponty claims that conceptual signification is founded on what he calls “gestural signification” or the *style* of language.¹² The style of a word or a language would include its tone and accent, its gestural or emotional significance, which provides the original mode of access to its linguistic signification. This generalizable “emotional essence” refers back to a mode of behavior or experience of the body as a “natural power of expression.”¹³ The style of the word is a gesture, a comportment of the body, its way of vibrating or resonating with its surroundings.¹⁴ Such gestural significations—words, vowels, phonemes—are, Merleau-Ponty tells us, “so many ways of singing the world” since they extract and, in the strict sense of the word, *express* the “emotional essence” of things.¹⁵ The body squeezes the emotional essence out of things like juice from an orange, and style is this juice. Different languages, on this view, are just so many variations on the body’s manner of expression, and the unique worlds that result are never entirely translatable.¹⁶ Style acts as the spark that arcs the gap between natural sense and conventional expression.

Merleau-Ponty’s account has been criticized by Foucault for its suggestion that expression amounts to no more than “pressing out” the implicit, taking-up the tacit meanings pre-inscribed in nature.¹⁷ But in fact, to treat sense as ready-made would contradict Merleau-Ponty’s description, since it would eliminate the body’s role in the constitution of sense and eliminate the possibility of different and incompatible worlds of meaning. Furthermore, on this view, the sense would preexist the sensible world that provides its context. The body no more constructs a sensible world piecemeal than a language is constructed by the mere accumulation of individual words. The part makes sense only on the basis of the whole; the thing or the word can be invested with sense only on the basis of a world of sense. Therefore, we must distinguish more clearly than did Merleau-Ponty between, on the one

hand, the stylizing and expressive act that takes place on the background of an already present world and, on the other, the founding of a world of meaning as such. The description that would have the body expressing a pre-existing sense could apply only to expression within an established world, that is, secondary or habitual expression.

Describing the radical creation of sense, the founding of a new world of meaning, proves more difficult precisely because it cannot be set off against the background of an existing world or norm. Like the founding of the world described by primal religions, such a radical creation requires the revelation of a fixed point, a central axis that orients all future developments.¹⁸ The fixed point is established against a backdrop of chaos, just as the “diagram,” for Francis Bacon, opens the new world of a painting precisely by bringing about the catastrophic collapse of figurative space.¹⁹ This institution of a world is not a creation *ex nihilo* flowing from the fountainhead of subjectivity; it can neither be traced to a “creative gesture” or act nor simply ascribed to the body’s “natural expression,” which always implies a norm or background. What is the motive force behind the radical genesis of a world of sense?

Before we return to this question, consider a second and not unrelated issue raised by Merleau-Ponty’s account of expression, namely, the continuity between “levels” or “mediums” of expression. In his commentary on Malraux’s history of painting, Merleau-Ponty offers a full-blown teleology of expression commencing with perception, progressing through painting, and culminating in language. Perception stylizes at the outset, since it sets up a pattern of resonance between myself and the thing, allowing my body to feel within itself the divergence from the norm that the thing introduces.²⁰

It is sufficient that we shape in the manifold of things certain hollows, certain fissures—and we do this the moment we are alive—to bring into the world that which is strangest to it: a sense There is style (and hence signification) as soon as there are figures and grounds, a norm and a deviation, a top and a bottom, that is, as soon as certain elements of the world assume the value of dimensions against which we subsequently measure all the rest and through which we indicate all the rest.²¹

This strange sense, after being introduced into the brute event of the world through our first division of figure from ground in perception, is reincarnated, Merleau-Ponty tells us, in progressively ductile expressive media: from

the perceiving body itself, to paint and canvas, lastly to air and written letters. All the while, it also gains an increasingly refined tendency toward self-reflection: one cannot perceive *about* perception, and painting *about* painting is perhaps possible only as an ideal limit. But language is immediately characterized by its self-torsion, the emergence of which is paralleled by that of self-reflection proper, a self-presence of thought so complete as to offer the appearance of having done away with the need for any medium whatsoever. Despite its obvious attraction for the ecologically-minded philosopher who sees in this theory of expression a way to recuperate a meaning and value for nature in its own right, this theory leaves much unanswered, e.g., What is the ontological status of the sense that is transferred from one medium to the next, and what motivates its progress through the series?

As we have seen thus far, the two questions confronting the theory of sense that we are developing concern the nature of the radical genesis of sense and an ontological account of the teleology of sense. Despite these questions, to which we will return momentarily, there is something about the continuity thesis of sense that remains intuitively compelling, and this stems from its commitment to an ontological continuity between humans and nature (taking "nature" here broadly, as does Whitehead, as equivalent to the perceived world).²² Such an ontological continuity between ourselves and the natural world carries some radical implications that might fruitfully be compared with the Buddhist concept of "dependent arising," according to which all things are interdependent, inseparable, and in a process of constant becoming.²³ Where do my boundaries as a human being begin and end? Not with my skin, as we typically assume, given the constant process of interaction between my body and the physical world around me both at macro- and microscopic levels. My bodily integrity is entirely dependent, at this moment, on such external forces as the air pressure within this room, while the content of my consciousness is inextricably interlaced with the sensory input I continuously receive from the whole of the world as it meets my eyes, ears, nostrils, and skin. If "I" engage in an expressive act, is it not the very being of the world with which I am inextricably intertwined that is "doing" the expressing? Would we not more accurately say that expressing is happening, that it is a process around which one cannot draw distinct boundaries, since it includes, at least marginally, the activity of the entire world as this impinges on the situation and perspective that I call mine? Considered in this light, we can better understand the metaphysical ramifications of Merleau-Ponty's reference to our being as that of a "hollow"

within the world²⁴ or as being's own self-interrogation.²⁵ Everything comes to pass as if expression arose through the world's striving to be perceived, to be painted, spoken, and thought. My body's struggle to express would then be nothing other than the world's struggle to express itself through me, as if I were an organ of this single massive body named Nature. Human being might be thought of as nature's engine of self-expression, its own coming-to-consciousness. As Merleau-Ponty affirms, quoting Cézanne, "The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness."²⁶

If the ontological continuity of humans with nature is pushed far enough, we must leave behind the idea that human subjects, or even living agents, are the extractors of sense, since sense involves the operation of the whole of being, even if this coming to expression is a regional operation within the whole. Sense does not originate as the resonance or feed-back loop obtaining between a pre-existing thing and perceiving body, but rather as the resonance from which these moments may be secondarily derived by abstraction. We arrive here at a deeper ontological dimension of sense than that described earlier by the dialogue of world and life, the fundamental dimension from which the terms of this dialogue arise by abstraction. This deeper dimension can be called "natural" only in a singular way, since this notion of "nature" is no longer defined by the classic opposition with the artificial, the human, or the organic. Rather, the term "nature" here can name only the continuity of being itself. Investigating the ontological status of sense and the motivations behind a teleology of sense leads us, therefore, to an examination of being as such, and we can turn once more to Merleau-Ponty's later investigations for inspiration. In primordial perception, Merleau-Ponty writes, subject and object, noesis and noema, are blurred to the point of disappearing into one sole "intentional fabric," namely, the "flesh of the sensible."²⁷ Rather than claiming that the body extracts the emotional essence of things, we should instead speak of a single reverberation out of which perception, gesture, painting, and speaking emerge.²⁸ Sense is ontologically more primordial than either a sense-bestowing subject or a sense-carrying substance, more basic than the poles of life and world themselves. It is the pure event from which the two orders of subject and object, or the two series of causality and intentionality, split off. Expression presses world and life out of the cauldron of sense. And if sense is ontologically basic, the classical dilemma of teleology falls by the wayside: we no longer need choose whether nature's telos is inherent or a projection of subjectivity, since the telos of sense lies at a level deeper than the separation

of nature and subjectivity.

But if the world thinks itself in me, if I am its consciousness, does this guarantee my right to speak on behalf of nature? Are all of my gestures and utterances, in fact, the pure “voice of nature” channeled apriori through my being? Not exactly, for several reasons. First of all, each expression is no more than a single limited moment of the world, the world as exposed, in the photographic sense of the term, from a single unique perspective. The singing of the entire world would require an infinite chorus of voices, one for each *Abschattung* of every object, one for each possible perspective on the world and across every sensory dimension.²⁹ And, second, even if all of these expressions could give voice at once, the result would be not cosmic harmony but cacophony, since the perspectives that they represent are impossible: the perceived world is composed of “incompatible and simultaneous ‘faces’”³⁰ arrayed like focal points on intersecting spatial and temporal axes, like a grand multi-dimensional stage set. There is no guaranteed harmony, no overarching scheme that would organize each expressed perspective, like interlocking monads, into a god’s-eye view. Nor, thirdly, is there any guarantee that sense traverses different mediums without distortion or remainder, as if a voice could be so pure that it carries nothing of the movement of the air. This is not a fault of sense but the very means of its expression, what Merleau-Ponty calls a “good error.”³¹

Moving forward with this theory of sense would require taking seriously Merleau-Ponty’s remarks that treat interrogation as a fundamental ontological operation, and specifically his interpretation of the emergence of sense as the self-interrogative becoming of being. This is a radicalization of Heidegger’s claim, in *Being and Time*, that the being of Dasein is the being of a question and, in particular, the being of the question of being. For Merleau-Ponty, our flesh is the node or pivot around which the flesh of the world turns back on itself, interrogating itself. The claim that sense is ontologically fundamental, then, must be qualified, since this may give the impression that sense is something present, a being. But sense is rather a happening, the event of radical creation, a vortex of self-reflective movement whose ongoing rupture throws off questioner and questioned, subject and object, body and thing, as so many by-products of its fission. In fact, it is in just this interrogative movement, the self-palpitation of the world’s flesh, that we find the engine for a teleology of expression. Each expressive modality—perception, art, language—carries forward an increasingly supple reflexive movement, a constant becoming that is as much absent as present,

much more a blind stumbling forward into an unknown future than the unwrapping of a pre-packaged and present sense. An understanding of being in the interrogative mode might resolve our outstanding questions about the being of sense and the teleology of expression. And if the activity of sense is a radical self-wondering, it would be fair to say not only that philosophy begins in wonder, but that nature does as well.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at a plenary round-table on "Nature and Language" at the 2002 meeting of the International Association for Environmental Philosophy in Chicago. The author is grateful to Irene J. Klaver and Steven Vogel for helpful comments at this session.

² Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 310.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin Boundas, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 25.

⁶ See Leonard Lawlor's explanation of Derridean *différance* in terms of Husserl's concept of noema in *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 3-4; and Deleuze's comparison of the noema and the pure event in *The Logic of Sense*, 21.

⁷ Of course, this calls for a reopening of the classical problem of teleology, extending from Aristotle through Kant and up to contemporary debates over the nature of function in contemporary philosophy of biology (See, e.g., David J. Buller, ed., *Function, Selection, and Design* [Albany: SUNY, 1999]). The ontological status of sense is the phenomenological parallel to this classical problem of teleology. We can see this problem unfolding in Merleau-Ponty's later works, where he is engaged in formulating a positive ontological account of ideality as the pivot or frame of being, rather than as an abstraction produced by consciousness, as the traditional understanding of eidetic variation would have it. See especially Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Notes and Comments on Aron Gurwitsch's *The Field of Consciousness*," trans. Ted Toadvine and Elizabeth Locey, *Husserl Studies* 17, no. 3 (2001): 173-193. I have commented on this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's project in "Phenomenological Method in Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Gurwitsch," *Husserl Studies* 17, no. 3 (2001): 195-205.

⁸ See David Wood's discussion of the plexity of time in "What is Eco-phenomenology?" in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, ed. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

⁹ Abram's most important work in this regard is *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

¹⁰ And Merleau-Ponty was certainly aware of this fact, as his discussions of animals in *The Structure of Behavior* and *Nature* make clear.

¹¹ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 3. Similar arguments have been offered by Erazim Kohák, Neil Evernden, and Holmes Rolston.

¹² In the chapter on gesture and language in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “The Body as Expression, and Speech,” Merleau-Ponty argues that “the sense of words must be finally induced by the words themselves, or more exactly, their conceptual signification must be formed by a kind of extraction from a gestural signification, which is immanent in speech” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962], 179).

¹³ cf. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 180.

¹⁴ My body is “a power of natural expression” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 181), and the spoken word is one of its gestures (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 184).

¹⁵ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 187.

¹⁶ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 187.

¹⁷ This is, for instance, Foucault’s criticism of Merleau-Ponty in “Theatrum Philosophicum,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977). I have discussed Foucault’s remarks in “Merleau-Ponty: Sense and Non-Sense of the Event,” in *Ereignis auf französisch: Temporalität–Freiheit–Sprache*, ed. Marc Rolli (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2004).

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 21.

¹⁹ See Gilles Deleuze, “The Diagram,” in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), esp. 81-82.

²⁰ “[P]erception already stylizes, that is, it affects all the elements of a body or behavior with a certain common deviation with respect to some familiar norm that I have behind me” (*The Prose of the World*, 60).

²¹ *The Prose of the World*, 61.

²² A. N. Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 3.

²³ *Pratityasamutpada*, also translated as “conditioned genesis” or “dependent origination,” receives a classic description in Walpola Rahula’s *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 53-55.

²⁴ *Phenomenology of Perception*, 215.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 103-4. I am suggesting that Merleau-Ponty is, in his own fashion, reaching a conclusion parallel to the metaphysical speculation with which Sartre ends *Being and Nothingness*: “[E]verything takes place as if the in-itself in a project to found itself gave itself the modification of the for-itself” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes [New York: Philosophical Library, 1956; reprinted, Gramercy Books, 1994], 621).

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 17. See also *Phenomenology of Perception*, 214, where Merleau-Ponty borrows a very similar expression from Valéry.

²⁷ “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” in Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 167; “Consequences for the perceived things: correlations of a carnal subject, rejoined to its movement and to its sensing;

interspersed in its internal circuit—they are made of the same stuff as it. The sensible is the flesh of the world, that is, the meaning [*sens*] in the exterior” (Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, trans. Robert Vallier [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003], 218).

²⁸ “The world is made of the same stuff as the body . . . vision happens among, or is caught in, things—in that place where something visible undertakes to see” (“Eye and Mind,” in Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Edie [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964], 163).

²⁹ And is it not possible that different expressive responses encompass different ranges, as the eye comprehends a greater spatial field than the hand? After stubbing my foot, my world is little larger than the immediate throbbing region of my toe, but when contemplating world history a much larger range of phenomena may come to awareness through me. Of course, coupled with the recognition that perspectives are impossible, a greater expressive field might also entail a greater tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity. It is not so much a matter of encompassing a greater whole as of situating oneself within juxtaposed worlds of meaning, as the bicultural or bilingual navigates incompatible orientations of signification.

³⁰ *Signs*, 15.

³¹ *The Visible and the Invisible*, 125.

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