

Darian Meacham

Sense and Life: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature and Evolutionary Biology

University of the West of England
United Kingdom
E-mail: darian.meacham@uwe.ac.uk

In this paper I first set out the conceptual landscape of Merleau-Ponty's later (post *Phenomenology of Perception*) philosophy of nature. I situate the concepts of behaviour and latency both within Merleau-Ponty's own thought and to a lesser extent the philosophical and scientific contexts from which he developed them. In doing so I attempt to sketch a theory of nature as generative of sense and analyzable in terms of meaningful relations. In the second part of the paper, I argue that, despite saying relatively little about evolutionary theory, Merleau-Ponty's ontology of nature bears a kind of affinity to many of the ideas put forward by proponents of an "Extended Evolutionary Synthesis". A philosophy of nature developed using the concepts of behaviour and latency could provide the ontological support for an extended evolutionary synthesis. To this end, I examine what I think are two paradigmatic cases of sense structures – institutions – being integrated and constitutive of biological evolutionary processes: niche construction and the heredity of learned behaviour in instinctive behaviour. These cases also help to elucidate an ontology of nature that contains, at its core, the institution of sense.