

# Fashion and the Mobile Body: The Value of Clothing and Fashion for Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Chiasm

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## Introduction

The potential of clothing and fashion is rarely appreciated in mainstream academic literature; often it is relegated to the margins with labels such as 'ephemeral' or 'frivolous'. Yet, clothing (and fashion in particular) provides one of the most explicit examples of global consumerism. The significance of this form of consumerism can be amplified through the writings of German philosopher Hans Jonas in his discussion of *metabolism of life* (Jonas 1992). This concept explores the temporal means of replenishing people's desire to resist decay and death by means other than food, drink, sleep, etc. These claims are situated further in my second section where I introduce aesthetics. My understanding of aesthetics does not confine itself to traditional understandings, rather I am persuaded by the writings of US pragmatist Mark Johnson (2007) who suggests that the body together with the mind and its interaction with the environment are relational essentials in our meaning-making processes. In my third section I continue drawing from philosophy when I turn to one of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's final concepts – *chiasm*. The introduction of this concept was one of Merleau-Ponty's ways of shifting attention in his later writings away from *perception* to the realisation of *being*. A realisation, discussed in the last section of this paper, that suggests there is an ontological relatedness to the arguments made in the preceding sections; one that realises the clothed body (and in particular its facility for mobility) as one of the most important research tools in meaning-making.

## Fashion and clothing: The metabolism of life

Clothing, we can immediately appreciate, is important for warmth, to protect us from natural weather conditions, and not forgetting, preserving our modesty. Of course, there might be a number of circumstances where we choose either not to wear clothes (for example, in the bathroom or bedroom) or adapt our choice

because of the weather (for example, rain or sun etc.) or perhaps to protect us from possible harm (from a dangerous substance or event) or even perhaps to depict status (i.e. a doctor, a nurse, a priest etc.). Furthermore, an extensive empirical study conducted by Johnson and Levy (1990) concluded that, in particular for women, a man's attractiveness and status was associated with the clothes he wears. Therefore, regardless of circumstance, the wearing of clothes is important. For as popular American author Mark Twain once wrote "clothes make the man (sic). Naked people have little or almost no influence in society" (Twain 1927).

In 2010, the fashion and clothing industry was the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest creative industry (following tourism) in the World. In terms of turnover, this industry exceeded \$1710 billion during that year and employed approximately 75 million people across the globe (Fashion United 2014). In the UK, clothing and fashion is the largest employer in the creative industries, directly employing 816,000 people. The industry is similar in size to food and drink services and generates more jobs than telecommunications, car manufacturing and publishing added together. Furthermore, its impact on tourism for the UK is immense, attracting visitors to the UK to shop or visit fashion exhibitions. A minimum estimate puts this tourism impact at a value of £98 million (approx. \$160 million) in 2009 (see British Fashion Council report 2010).

However, in academic terms, clothing and fashion does not invite this same degree of status – in fact, often the opposite is true – in that, it can attract a certain degree of scorn. Certainly questions such as: 'is being *in-fashion* important?' is not seen by many parts of academia as a serious question. Yet, behind this question lies an influence that is broad and extensive, for example, fashion is significant when we start to explore cultural studies or issues associated with identity or self-identity (Bartlett 2010; Entwistle 2000; Lewis 2004; Wilson 2004) or if we examined aspects of historical studies (Breward 2003; Laver and de la Haye 2002; Mendes and de la Haye 2010) or aspects of business and management studies (in particular, the areas of branding and marketing, for example Jackson and Shaw 2009) or even studies of technology (Hannelore et al. 2008) or Science (in particular I am thinking of Cosmetic Science, see Reed et al. 1986). I could continue with this listing but this is not my purpose here – rather I will suggest that clothing and fashion are valuable for elaborating some of German philosopher Hans Jonas' arguments.

Hans Jonas (1992) argues that 'replenishment' is an inherent need for all living creatures – whether it is through food and drink, sleep, leisure etc. Yet, Jonas observes, people living in our contemporary age need more than simply satisfying these basic forms of replenishment and he labels this: *metabolism of life*.

A metabolism of life, Jonas (1992) claims, is a temporal condition bound up in the continued reclaiming of life. The matter which composes people is “forever vanishing downstream” ...and yet to be alive we must constantly take in new matter to replace this” (Jonas 1992: 34), we age, we need to eat, sleep etc. but for many people in contemporary life these basic needs are insufficient to fulfill our expectations of being *alive* – accordingly we look to satisfy additional requirements. Uppermost for so many people, and this traverses over many forms of divisions globally (from culture to gender), is the desire to wear nice, contemporary clothing. For some people what we wear is as important (and for others more) as eating (Shoff and Thompson 2006)! At the core of many eating disorders are attempts to lose weight and/or ‘fit’ into certain forms of clothing and this is prevalent across the globe, class, religion, gender etc. This observation might open a series of important issues related to health etc., however, this is not the direction that I intend to take this examination, rather, the point I want to make here is that we can widely appreciate that in this *consumptive-driven* world that first impressions of what we wear (including recognition of specific labels/brands) are very important to many of us on a daily basis as we engage in the world.

For Jonas (1992), replenishment is a form of resistance to decay and death. Jonas (1992) elaborates that a living entity has a future insofar as its being is its doing, i.e., stretches beyond the now of its organic state to what comes next. That is, who we are and how we live, is constituted by us moving forward and grasping the new. Jonas (1992) suggests that the “will be” (the intake of new material) determines the “is”, as represented by its present activity; and it is the accumulation of these collective comments that suggest fashion and clothing provides a legitimate (and central) contribution to how we live our lives in this contemporary world. In the modern world, for many of us, we no longer see clothing merely as a function of warmth or modesty. It is now more about the signs we need to express our own identity, both to ourselves and externally to others. Personal vanity, attractiveness have long been identified as key features to mask decay (aging) and ultimately delaying death (for example Eicher et al. 2008). Our clothes (and the manner we wear them) provide evidence of our identity (our wealth, status, etc), attractiveness and our on-going response to aging. The psychological need to ‘look good’ and to ‘feel right’ is a significant want to many people across different contexts, and importantly, persists throughout the whole of our lives.

Renaud Barbaras (2003: 165) argues that the essence of being alive lies outside of itself, that is, our expectations of life is characterized by the pursuit of our own essence, that is, our own significance. Barbaras labels this *desire* in a specific sense and something quite different to our understanding of the term:

'need'. Unlike need, desire cannot ultimately be fulfilled; thus if we are to satisfy our desire – this is a temporary relief – for soon after feeling fulfilled (for many of us) we turn to another for its replenishment. Fashion exemplifies this desire. Many of us have more than one coat or one dress. In fact many of us have many sets of clothes, many dresses, multiple pairs of shoes etc. Do we buy these items to satisfy our basic needs or in accordance with desire? For many people the desire for additional clothes is greater than simply wanting to look attractive or stylish. It exceeds this type of feeling and includes additional emotions, including wanting to feel confident, and/or to appear contemporary, or to represent good taste, wealth, status etc., and of course, not forgetting wanting to wear something different from last time! The pleasure of purchasing that extra pair of shoes is not confined to wearing them but seeps over to the pleasure of possession. Do we expect that purchasing this extra pair of shoes will satisfy (and therefore nullify) this desire – the answer is unlikely, perhaps only temporarily, that is, until the next opportunity arises? In our modern contemporary consumerist society, replenishment is fulfilled by a combination of needs and desires. Certainly we can appreciate the necessity to fulfill needs – and perhaps purchasing clothes for warmth, for safety, for work etc meets this? Whereas, wanting to remain in fashion is not a need - rather it is a desire, and yet in contemporary society for many of us, it is vital. The buying of shoes for some is not restricted to need (after all we can only wear one pair of shoes at a time!) but rather (for some) reflects the desire to have a variety of shoes – perhaps for different occasions, or to match certain colors of clothing etc.

Of course, not all people would characterize clothing and fashion in these categories. What is interesting about the character of desire (unlike need) is that replenishment varies across people and circumstance – it extends to status, wealth, fame, power, leisure etc. Furthermore, the character of these desires does not remain stable over time; it evolves as our own circumstances and focus changes over the course of our lives. A final point is that replenishment does not confine itself to exact replacements; it evolves and adjusts in its quest for the reclaiming of life.

The approach I have introduced here regarding the relationships between clothing, fashion and philosophy inevitably concentrates its attention around the body and in the next section I develop this further to amplify its significance in our meaning-making processes.

## Aesthetics and the body

For me, my understanding of aesthetics concerns itself with the conditions of experience, that is, a breadth (and depth) of assessment that exceeds traditional descriptors of art, beauty and taste. I support the view presented by US Philosopher Mark Johnson (2007a) that aesthetics is more persuasively about how people construct and experience meaning in everyday contexts. This includes a rich variety of assessments that start from assessing the form and structure of a situation, together with its qualities, our felt sense of it, our rhythmic engagement with its context, and also our emotional interactions with the situation (if appropriate). Johnson (2007a) rejects both the cognitive view which suggests that meaning is only a linguistic phenomenon and likewise he does not support the Kantian view that Aesthetics is primarily subjective, connected to feelings and therefore non-conceptual and incapable of producing knowledge. In these circumstances, I am persuaded by a relationship that appreciates the relationship between our own body, our mind and how these are shaped and interact with everyday events.

Thus, the body in its interaction with the environment generates a dialogue of examinations and interactions that do not limit themselves to assessments of the beautiful, but rather, also acknowledges other types of appreciation. Thus, an engagement in this way draws on our sensual potential as a means of uncovering multiple layers of meaning – many of which would remain hidden unless we approach and engage with events in this way.

Eugene Gendlin (1991) suggests that meaning (in everyday life) is relational, that is, it is about how one thing, quality or event relates to, or connects with, other things. Meaning emerges through an often unconscious negotiation between the structural, formal and conceptual dimensions associated with traditional forms of knowledge intertwined with the pre-conceptual, the non-formal and felt dimensions of experience. The ‘meaning’ emerges from this interaction, from what we think, feel and do, and it lies in recurring qualities, patterns and feelings all blended together. In this way, Gendlin (1991) argues meaning is already there before we actually experience meaning reflexively. The words, symbols, representations are not independently existing entities that capture or express the felt sense of a situation. Nor does the felt sense exist entirely independent of the words we are speaking. Instead, they are interwoven and developed together. Traditionally, western thinking has cast *felt sense* as something that does not possess any lasting value, and that only through words does their power emerge (Gendlin, 1991). Whilst, in many circumstances this may be true, closer reflection suggests we can all point to certain emotive situations that possess power and meaning in ways that precede, if not reduces

the need for, words. For example I still remember the fear of a hot iron many years after accidentally touching it as a child. For me this is a memory that has less to do with articulating words and more to do with the power of a specific memory caused by pain and hurt!

Therefore, modes of thinking that only privileges traditional forms of knowledge will miss large parts of the embodied situational experiences unless we open ourselves to what constitutes these forms as being meaningful in the first place. In the ontological position I am advocating, when engaging with everyday situations, our minds need the vehicles of our bodies to interact with our environment and it is through this relational contact we are able to grasp, extract and generate multiple layers of meaning able to exceed traditional forms of knowledge. Traditionally academia has privileged the mind as governing our knowledge-making processes but in everyday situations we need our bodies, its facility for movement to work in harmony with the mind. To deny or privilege only part of this harmonious relationship produces only partial realisation of its potential and meaning.

We can start to demonstrate the potential of this engagement in multiple ways. For the sake of clarity let me amplify further, in that I am drawn to Johnson's (2007b) example that employs gestures as bodily enactments of meaning. They are not uses of bodily motions to express some pre-conceived thought, rather, here the gesture itself brings meaning into existence. In that, a gesture can be the very incarnation of meaning-making. Johnson (2007b: 93) elaborates further: "They can be 'beat' gestures, which might give emphasis to, or provide the rhythm of our thinking and speaking. They can be 'iconic', when their structure is isomorphic with some pattern or contour of our experience or perception (e.g., when you tell a motorist to turn right up ahead, while simultaneously gesturing with a right-turn curve of your hand). Or they can be 'metaphoric', where our bodily movement can be used to present some abstract domain (e.g., when you hold your arms out to the side, palms up, alternately raising first the right and then the left hand, as if measuring two weights, while saying, 'I couldn't decide whether to go out on a date with her'). But, in every case, the gesture is the realization of the meaning" (Johnson 2007b: 93).

For me, clothing and fashion provide a valuable addition to these understandings. The mobile body in developing its relational potential in the world is normally clothed. It is important to appreciate that what is worn is not a neutral activity. In addition to deciding what we want to wear to reflect our own self-identity, we hope that such choices are interpreted in accordance with the quasi-language that our clothing means to our audience (see Davis 1992 for a more detailed explanation of the quasi-language for fashion). Davis (1992) argues that audiences form assessments of others through dressing and appear-

ance. For example, if a person is wearing a particular piece of clothing that intimidates, or attracts, or suggest a certain status this may affect our choice as we employ our bodies' facility for movement. We might either move toward or alternatively away from possible engagement based upon these initial assessments.

Traditionally, developing meaning has relied heavily on vision. Science has privileged vision; ocular-centric traditions (see Jay 1993) have dominated our knowledge-gathering approach in academia for hundreds of years. It was built upon an ontological position attempting to minimize and control the influence of people. Accordingly, the observer adopted detached, one-way process whereby he/she identified the subject and developed various tools to acquire robust, rigorous, rational, and objective knowledge. Yet, by suggesting an embodied aesthetics approach (amongst others), this position is revoked to become one whereby the observer is no longer detached and following a one-way approach to gathering knowledge but rather one built upon a two-way, relational process whereby the traditional ocular-centric approach is complemented by our facility for movement and our other senses. Thus, there is a reciprocal potential for all of our senses, for example, our ability to listen then is no longer just a focus on what the observer can hear, but also how others listen (and respond) to them.

I could at this point proceed in a variety of directions to amplify this potential but in keeping with the principle aim of clothing and fashion and, in order to introduce the next section, I will concentrate on 'touch'. The traditional privileging of sight at the expense of our other senses has not always been greeted with universal support. Certainly in terms of touch, some philosophers (and others across other academic areas) have lamented lost opportunities. For example, Luce Irigaray (1985) claims that a woman takes more pleasure from touching than from looking. For Irigaray, touch possesses a richness that surpasses vision in that whilst we can look at an object and see its shape, size, texture etc. It is not until we are able to move ourselves towards the object/event – touch it, feel it and engage with it – that we can appreciate the deeper qualities of the object/event. For example, when we go shopping, how important is touch? Perhaps in a supermarket as we proceed down the aisles and pick up groceries wrapped in mass-produced packaging, here touch is less significant. But once we reach the vegetables and fruit sections, here we are able to still employ our vision, but it is through olfaction and touch that we can feel the texture and perhaps smell the ripeness of the produce. With regard to clothing here we can appreciate that our ability to view what people are wearing but also complement this with the experience of touching and feeling the cloth, not only as an object hanging or placed in a cupboard, but also as an object that clothes our bodies and

rests on our skin. Its texture, weight and how it allows our bodies to move oscillates with other layers of meaning, for example, our expectations of what we feel wearing this item will mean something to observers. That is, are we attempting to depict style, sophistication, wealth, identity etc. Of course, whether this meaning is (or will be perceived as) the same for all members of an audience goes to the core of the discussion and it is here that we might conclude that meaning therefore is individualistic – ‘that which works for me’.

It is this oscillating relationship that brings forward certain senses and allows others to temporarily retire that is important – not least, that in the next moment, as other situations emerge, this challenges a different mix of senses to come together to complement our knowing. It is the complexity of this and other relationships that we start to explore in the next section.

### **Chiasm and being**

The claims made in the previous section suggest that body is an inter-subjective, mobile and sensitive tool capable of engaging with the most complex and demanding contexts. In other words, the body possesses a sophistication that is able to extract layers of meaning that surpass a reliance on vision. In this way, the complementarity of these various attributes is a vital feature of this approach in producing rich perceptive understandings.

In this section, I attempt to go further and employ the final writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to amplify his claim (and need) for something that exceeds perception. In this section I discuss one of Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) more obtuse concepts: *chiasm*. Often this concept suffers from inaccessibility not least that finding accessible practical examples are limited. However, for me, clothing and fashion might offer one such possibility.

My understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of chiasm is based upon a basic assumption that as the body is in the world and is actively perceiving events, that he or she is also being perceived (see for further elaboration Merleau-Ponty 1964 and 1968). In other words, this role is a reversible one and this forms the basis of his introduction of the Greek letter chi or  $\chi$  Merleau-Ponty (1968) labelled chiasm as a form of dehiscence – a splitting open, a form of reflexivity that allows us to occupy the position of both perceiver and perceived.

Normally, I can appreciate occupying one of these positions. I can adopt a position where I can either perceive or be perceived by others. But chiasm raises the possibility that as I actively participate in the world that I can blur these distinct boundaries and am able to occupy both positions concurrently.



Merleau-Ponty (1968) illustrates the potential of chiasm with the example of the exchange of our two hands. In that we can use our left hand to grasp our right hand – thus, the left is holding the right hand, which is being held. The experience of holding and being held can therefore be appreciated. Both experiences are different and yet related. Using this same situation we can also appreciate the potential of it being perfectly reversible in that I can swap my hands to adopt the opposite role – that is, my right hand can reverse its role to one that holds the left. If it is a perfect transfer between my hands, does this suggest a simple reversing of felt with touch? Perhaps so, yet if the situation were not perfectly reversible, then the question arises, were I able to reverse my situation would this then produce quite different forms of meaning?

Certainly, it is rare that such a perfect symmetrical relationships exists, rather, normally reversing roles and adopting the alternate position never entirely coincides in the same way as this hands swapping example suggests (see Merleau-Ponty 1968: 194f.). Yet, the point he makes is that whether perceiver (or perceived) can both draw meaning from these experiences. But he is clear that it is likely that the meaning drawn from holding, and the experience of being held, will be different, and yet from these divergent positions they can collaborate together in contributing to our understandings.

As Merleau-Ponty (1968: 123) amplifies: “(this) does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things”. David Morris (2010), amongst others, extends the notion of chiasm in terms of reversibility. For Morris (2010), in elaborating his argument, returns to the traditional academic privileging of sight in meaning-making and suggests that simply reversing our roles and assuming that our being seen is a condition of seeing is a relatively basic level of perception and not what Merleau-Ponty was attempting to achieve with chiasm.

Morris suggests that Merleau-Ponty in his various later writings was attempting to develop a deeper and more penetrative means of meaning-making; one that exceeds reliance upon perception. To amplify his claim he cites a number of Merleau-Ponty foundational propositions: “the world is made of the same stuff as the body” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 163), things and I are made of the same “element” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 139) and “[t]hings have an internal equivalent in me” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 164). Morris (2010) argues that the introduction of chiasm is a tool for Merleau-Ponty to shift attention away from perception to the realisation of being. A realisation that understanding our being-in-the-world exceeds the visual and basic forms of perception and encompasses

the full range of our senses in developing meaning. So the relationship between perceiver and perceived are not two different *appearances* of one being, but should be appreciated as two (at least) divergent ways in which being *is* (Morris 2010).

Merleau-Ponty's (1964 and 1968) latter writings seem all to converge to this understanding that *being* encompasses and exceeds perception. That is, our understandings are not confined to vision, but extend to, what we can uncover from within the convolutions of our bodies as they move, shift and employ various senses in engaging with the object/event. In ways that are not just complementary but emerge from divergent perspectives. This, in effect, is amplifying the relationship that Merleau-Ponty labels in the title of his posthumous text: *Visible and invisible* – a title that more accurately written as (and this may suffer from translation from its original, *Le Visible et l'invisible*): *Visible and in-the-visible*. That is, what we may see in an object/event is its appearance but what really constitutes it, are layers of attributes that lie beyond the visual, that is, in-the-visible.

Finding suitable exemplars to capture this potential is difficult – yet for me clothing does possess the potential to amplify *being*. Let me enlarge, in choosing a garment from the shop/store, I employ my vision and identify something that I think I would like to wear, accordingly I move my body towards it and then complement my visual by touching the garment and feeling its texture with my fingers and hand. For many of us, intuitively we will want to go to the next stage if we are considering its purchase, and this is by deciding to try it on (rehearse its feel) in the changing room. As we can appreciate from our respective experiences, trying a garment on in this way is not restricted to test if it fits – although this may vary if the garment is being considered as a replacement (a need) or a desire (fashion). It is also about gathering other experiences to form an overall assessment. As Morris (2010: 145) observes, these might be “two inflections of being that at once line-up and follow one another: they are ever so close, yet in that very closeness they are irreducibly divergent”.

Let me further amplify my understanding of this chiasmic relationship as I wear the garment. I can feel the cloth against my skin and if I were to place and press my hand on top of this same garment (acting as a mediator) whilst wearing it, then I can both touch and feel concurrently. This enriched experience is no longer confined to the one-way process of looking and touching the garment that hangs on the rack but now is one that reflects the growing potential of converging both complementary and divergent routes to my assessment of the garment. Let me elaborate a little further. I cannot rely on how it looks as I hold it up in front of a mirror – this is not enough - I need to complement my assessment with wearing the garment – but as I wear it, I don't just rely on the

mirror, I brush my hand over its surface and feel its weight on my skin. Do I feel comfortable as I move my body in wearing this garment – does its weight, flow and fit meet my need/desire? These are the types of feelings and questions that bombard my assessment.

A further layer to appreciate in understanding this complex collection of signs is that as I touch and feel this garment on my skin, I also am aware (in my reflexive way) that I am exercising (a form of) oscillation between activity and passivity. Activity in the sense as I press down on the cloth/garment I am focusing my attention to privilege this sensation – however, very soon if not immediately afterwards, because I feel pressure of the cloth, I can feel its texture and the weight of touch against my skin. As such, this feeling emerges as active and the touch recedes to a passive state. Whilst at that initial moment of touching my feeling was passive – which does not necessarily mean inactive – yet as soon as pressure is placed on my skin this creates a type of transfer resulting in my feeling of the fabric to emerge and come to the fore of my attention. Can we feel both touch and feel concurrently? Or is this active and passive oscillation (between touch and felt) in practice? What does this suggest?

Of course, returning to Morris's (2010) initial propositions drawn from Merleau-Ponty's writings, at one level, someone might observe that the garment is not made of the same stuff as I am – it is a textured material and not made of flesh and blood etc. This is true, but for me, its manufacture, its feel (is it itchy, stiff or too elastic etc.), its styling, how it moves on my body, its contribution to my self-identity, and its facility to convey meaning to others who look at me wearing this garment are wrapped up in a complex web of contributions for both my own assessment and what I expect from my social experience.

A final layer already mentioned above but deserving of a little more attention is the observation that in most changing rooms there exists a mirror and inevitably as we wear the garment we look into the mirror to gain an idea how we think the garment will look on us as we wear it. There has been a long tradition of the impact and value of the mirror (see for example, Derrida (1986), Lacan (1966), and in particular Rorty (1979) and whilst this is an interesting collection of literature, for me I wish to confine my attention here to a few short observations relating to chiasm and the mirror. Not least, looking in the mirror now is quite different from my initial look when perceiving it hanging on the rack. Now, I can touch/press my garment against my skin, feel its texture and concurrently look at my image of this experience in a mirror. This combined set of sensual experiences is no longer confined to complementary but also captures and includes divergence. Thus, this is no longer a duality between touch and feel but a *plethora* of signs and signals that amplify the overall experience. The image of my body in the mirror objectifies it and yet I am also aware that it is

me. However, whilst one might argue that what the image depicts is what external audiences see, my understanding of this image from the position of the wearer/actor can never be fully reduced to the same experience as the external viewer. The external audience relies only on the visual and forms their understanding from this relatively superficial assessment. An assessment that compares to what we all share every day - as we too gaze at others.

Finally I can conclude that in looking at the image of myself in the mirror (and perhaps this is especially pertinent for someone trying/rehearsing wearing specific clothing) I am now able to appreciate the layers of understanding that is emerging and how this experience is producing a blurring of relationships in the manner suggested by chiasm; one that has opened my reflexive attention to a position beyond perception towards a space for being.

### **Ontological relatedness and concluding comments**

In looking to demonstrate the value of clothing and fashion this reminds us again of the ontological significance of the body. Traditional ontological claims refer to matters of 'real' existence – that is appreciating the distinction between a realist ontology which assumes that a social and natural reality exists independently of people's cognitive structures, as compared to a subjective ontology that appreciates that the external social and natural reality is a creation of our consciousness and cognitions. For Merleau-Ponty (1968) these are the wrong claims. He argued that we should not be concerned with issues relating to subjectivity or objectivity rather, he suggests, we need to ask – what is the status of the inquirer in relation to 'reality'? Merleau-Ponty rarely explored ontology – only mentioning it rather than expressly devoting significant attention to its examination, but with regards to the discussion presented in this paper, this lies at the core of our understandings.

Merleau-Ponty spent most of his writings advocating that the 'real' in people-based contexts requires the inquirer to be physically involved. In other words, if the inquirer is not physically involved, then who and how is an assessment being made of what is real? And perhaps most pertinently, is it legitimate for anyone to claim (as in the scientific method) that they are somehow removed or detached from the real when in fact pragmatically each person is in the world making contributions that have cause and effect! Of course, in contexts that do not focus on people (for example Science) this type of defence is likely to produce a weaker claim to knowledge (but still one that in some circumstances is contestable!).

The ontological position presented here is that being is determinate, that is, this is how we exercise our orientations, senses, meanings, differences that make a difference, rather than remaining detached and viewing ourselves as being an indifferent blank, void of all sensible determinations.

In these circumstances, Mark Johnson's (2007) embodied aesthetics-led approach emerges from the belief that perception is not an isolated activity but one that results from a network of interwoven sensual-led series of relational engagements. Fashion and its central place in consumerism provide a means of synthesising the mind (metabolism of life), with the body (appearance, movement etc) and the environment (its impact and facility to communicate). The very nature of our involvement in consumerism demands that through our fashionable clothed bodies that we actively engage; whereas an unclothed body would likely reduce (and distract) these opportunities. Yet, in clothing the body and using the experience of wearing clothes, this also enables deeper opportunities for self-reflection in ways that simply surpass ontological accounts that rely on visual observation. In other circumstances, for different academic audiences, we might have explored this potential from alternative perspectives, one example might be the potential and experience of wearing clothing and fashion that are art objects in their own right (see Kim 1998)?

Finally, clothing does provide a rare opportunity to reveal Merleau-Ponty's later ontological shift from perception to being (see Merleau-Ponty 1968). Layers of examination that penetrate beyond developing additional complementary perspectives to the positive utilisation of the body as a form of hinge (or fold), exploiting what might be described as, divergent contributions 'for itself and for the other' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968:189).

In people-based contexts, the body is a hinge because it is the agent and intermediary for attracting and enabling emerging signs. My understanding of the use of divergence in this way includes and exceeds complementary contributions to meaning. That is, a realisation that contributions not only add to each other from the similar – for example, as I actively touch the fabric I can also complement this through my vision – yet also from the divergent; in that I can surpass the passive feel of the weight and texture on my skin so that it becomes an active contributor. The result is multiple layers of sensual meaning built from a plethora of signs that I argue generate vital ingredients to aid and assist me for the future.

Merleau-Ponty's (1968) aim was to exceed perception and his appreciation of the significance of the body and the potential of chiasm has been realised through the contribution of clothing and fashion. What other contributions clothing and fashion might make to core theories remains a quest for the future.

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