



## ‘What to wear?’: Clothing as an example of expression and intentionality

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### ABSTRACT

I will argue here that for many of us the act of dressing our bodies is evidence of intentional expression before different audiences. It is important to appreciate that intentionality enables us to understand how and why we act the way we do. The novel (and potentially significant) contribution this paper makes to this examination is employing clothing as a means of revealing the characteristics of intentionality. In that, it is rare to identify one exemplar that successfully captures the relationships between the cognitive and physical characteristics of its application. Nevertheless, this paper will not attempt to fully encompass the traditional approaches associated with this concept but instead employ both the early and later writings of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his claim that our lived bodies are an expressive space from which we act intentionally. In other words (and this is critical for the approach of this paper), that the manner by which we dress our bodies is likely to offer a significant means of revealing the character of intentionality in everyday life and by this, claim that clothing can communicate. Accordingly, this first-person account closely examines both the cognitive and physical experience of a simple clothing example: ‘what to wear?’ and the experience of an everyday clothing purchase in a store and its subsequent impact when the item of clothing is worn for different audiences. The ensuing discussion systematically examines the significance of marrying Merleau-Ponty’s writings with this everyday example through private and public audiences and in abstract and public spaces.

### KEYWORDS

Maurice Merleau-Ponty; reversibility; dress; expression; intentionality; bodily communication; public audience

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Professor of Sociology and Social Policy Julia Twigg suggests that ‘Clothes are the vestimentary envelope that contains and presents the body’ (Twigg, 2007; Twigg, 2009). A further introductory thought comes from the French philosopher and writer Hélène Cixous, when she observes that clothes are not primarily a shield for the body but function rather as an extension of it (Cixous, 1994). These opening comments are valuable for they provide a contextual foundation for our ensuing examination that will claim that our understanding of dressing the body should not be restricted to assessments of warmth, or simply descriptions as outer layers of appearance; but rather, as layers of meaning that emerge from the ‘body’ outwards and toward the experience of ‘being-in-the-world’.

However, the depth and range of these relationships (between the body and dress/clothing) is a complex and rich area, well beyond the capabilities of one paper. Therefore, here, my aim is to restrict the scope of my examination to what might be construed as a simple everyday relationship, one that the many of us struggle with each morning: ‘what to wear?’

I will argue here that for many of us the act of dressing our bodies is evidence of intentional expression before different audiences. Let me defend this claim and I will do this at two levels of examining the audience. Firstly, privately, here, when I am my own audience as I gaze at my reflection in the mirror, I note that when I am wearing certain clothes — I feel better — I feel more confident. For example, I feel wearing this expensive suit today makes me feel both confident and stylish, and from prior experience, I know this will have an impact on my bearing and interactions in the spaces that I will occupy, and interact with, in the day ahead.

The second level is before a public audience. I suggest at this level that my choice of dress or clothing is a form of communication, if you like, a message that I am sending from myself to external audiences — and the message I am sending through my dress alone is one that surpasses simply noting my presence. However, communication at this level is now different to that which I rehearsed at the private level, now I have to appreciate that there is a gap between the intention of the message (my planned choice of wearing a particular item of clothing) and its receipt (how audiences interpret my choice) and frequently this communication does not enjoy the advantage of reinforcement or elaboration through verbal language. However, on this occasion I am not going to explicitly explore and critique the effectiveness (or not) of this form of communication but rather focus on a critical feature within it — namely: the concept of *intentionally*. This is an important concept to understand, for greater appreciation of it, enables us to understand how and why we act the way we do. Significantly, I am purposely employing clothing as a means of exemplifying multiple ways of knowing about the character of intentionality; and in identifying this simple everyday single exemplar, as a means of revealing these layers of understanding is rare.

Furthermore, at this level, I am aware that my familiarity of the different public audiences that I will encounter in the day ahead will change as I move to fulfill my tasks. In these inter-subjective circumstances, as I move between these more, and other less, familiar audiences I will have relationally have more or less confidence in the effectiveness of my intentional choice of dress. That is, for those audiences that I am familiar with then I am more confident that the message I am conveying through my choice of dress will be appreciated, but with those whom I have less familiarity, then I am less so, and will have to resort to general societal interpretations.

This opening clarification reveals the important and complex relationship between mind and body. My argument here is that the evidence of clothing and dress provides rich exemplification of many of the arguments made by French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, I should make it clear from the beginning, to the best of my knowledge, Merleau-Ponty did not explicitly examine intentionality in terms of employing clothing or dress in any of his writings.

Accordingly, in the first section I will introduce why we clothe ourselves and distinguish between the notions of dress and clothing. Following this, the discussion will move on to examine whether clothing can communicate? That is, whether what we wear does indeed express meaning across different levels of audience? Our discussion then reaches the core of the paper with a pivotal discussion of intentionality, which predominantly privileges both Merleau-Ponty's early and later writings and his focus on the experience of 'being-in-the-world'. The paper then attempts to synthesis the forgoing contextual sections in a structured discussion through the exemplification of clothing.

## CONTEXT: THE BODY, DRESS AND COMMUNICATION

Throughout this account I will often employ the term 'clothing' and at other times use the word 'dress'. In this paper it may appear that I frequently overlap the terms, or privilege one of them, perhaps to fit into a particular elaboration of an argument — however, they do mean different things — and at this stage it is important to appreciate the distinction, let me enlarge.

Dressing the body includes many acts and products that serve as different means of nonverbally communicating. As we dress the body, we manipulate, modify, and supplement it with a wide range of products and artefacts (for example, in addition to clothing we should also include artefacts such as: watches, bracelets, rings, bags, tattoos, *etc.*). These acts and products allow us to present ourselves to others through the development of personal, social, and cultural identities. A valuable definition of dress might be: 'an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in

communicating with other human beings' (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1992: 5). I am attracted to this definition as it introduces the notion of whether dress/clothing can communicate? However, before I develop this route further, let me introduce why we wear clothing!

The earliest document that I could find examining this issue was written in 1575 (fortunately re-printed in Johnson, Torntore, & Eicher, 2003) written by Michel de Montaigne. In his essay, he attempts to explain why humans wear clothing, and why we have adopted what he calls these 'borrowed means' (Montaigne, 2003: 224). Montaigne stated that 'the naked state' (Montaigne, 2003: 225) is the natural condition and undressed humans, like all living things, did not need artificial protection against the effects of the physical environment. However, humans lost this protection when they started wearing clothes. Crawley some three hundred plus years later in 1912 (Crawley reproduced in: Johnson, Torntore, & Eicher, 2003), took a slightly different direction and presented an early anthropological approach to the study of dress. He sees dress as both an expression and extension of personality, and in this sense, then, explains how dress extends the capabilities of the body. Thus how we employ our dress communicates to different audiences. In 1918, George Van Ness Dearborn continues by suggesting 'one's clothes are one of the important things that intervenes between the individual personality and his environment' (Van Ness Dearborn reproduced in: Johnson, Torntore, & Eicher, 2003: 4). Thus, dressing and clothing is a form of non-verbal, one-way, form of communication with public audiences as we go about our activities in the external world.

Certainly, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in the middle of the twentieth century, appreciated the potential of the body as a means of expression to complement or replace language but his exemplification of these arguments was normally employed via fine art rather than be arranged to amplify or support the potential of clothing or dress. Nevertheless, he did note the importance and significance of expression and style — and this fits in well with the theme of this paper. He wrote:

A personal style is never simply given or chosen. It is a response to and founded upon the conditions of existence and embodiment. It constitutes the establishment of a lived coherence which gathers the elements of existence into life, a project with direction and character. Style ensures my existence of stability, while allowing for the possibility of growth and change (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 242).

Merleau-Ponty's approach to our understanding of the significance of the perception of the body steers between two competing, but for him, ultimately inadequate alternatives. The first is the traditional disembodied thinking subject, a position that adopts a purely intellectual route to discovery. Yet

Merleau-Ponty dismisses this rationalistic route as unrealistic and insufficient in understanding everyday life. The second route is from the physical sciences and its renouncement of the first-person perspective. This results in Merleau-Ponty taking a different perspective when he argues that to understand the body-in-the-world demands the adoption of a first-person perspective. His first-person approach argues that any understanding of the body will be richer and more persuasive if we experience it as 'being-in-the-world'. This constitutive positioning is not interested in so-called divisions between the subjective and the objective but rather what it is like to be 'living'. The advantage of this perspective is that it allows the person to 'live' the experience and thus 'feel' the experience first hand. However, whilst this adoption does enable us to develop a rich and persuasive examination of the body everyday life, it is limited in other ways. Its limitation is that from this first-person position my ability to observe my body is restricted. I can hold my arm up or point my foot outwards but in each of these (and other cases) I can only possess a partial view. Likewise I might look into my reflection in a full-length mirror but still my observation is limited to that profile which I can see in the reflection.

In terms of public audiences perhaps from their positioning they can see more of me than the one profile that I can view in the mirror. Furthermore, when I look in the mirror I am normally static whereas public audiences can frequently appreciate me in movement. Yet nevertheless their perceptions (especially from a distance and not enhanced by verbal language) are still restricted to the appearance of my surface image. They might recognize the value of my movement and thus be aware of multiple surface dimensions of me, but this does not capture the layers of living that I enjoy, and furthermore, appreciate how I might employ my other senses (in this context, especially touch) to complement my knowing and being. At the private level, I am aware that as I 'try on' (or rehearse) my clothing (or other forms of dress) and on my body that my hands, especially my fingers are stroking the surface of the fabric. I might be using my hands to stroke its texture to smooth the creases, or to feel its texture or weight, and collectively these are vital contributors to my internal understandings as I develop my intentional choice considering how I can imagine how it will feel to wear this item of clothing on my body for the day (or period) ahead. Access to this level of private bodily level of engagement is not available to public audiences — and yet (and this is important to appreciate) it is likely that individually a large proportion of this audience — will have enjoyed similar cognitions and actions when making their own intentional choices for 'what to wear' earlier in the day.

This observation reinforces Merleau-Ponty's position that my body is my perspective on the world — a perspective that appreciates that our body is a 'transcendental field' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962: 61–74). That is, a space of possibilities, impossibilities, and necessities constitutive of our perceptual

world (Carman, 2008: 82). Thus the body is not just a causal but also a transcendental condition of perception. In other words, Merleau-Ponty has no understanding of perception in abstraction rather it as an entity demanding relational engagement with other people and objects as part of being-in-the-world.

However before I develop his elaboration further let me conclude this contextual introduction by reviewing the claim that dress can communicate. Joanne Entwistle (2000) observes that

All cultures 'dress' the body in some way, be it through clothing, tattooing, cosmetics or other forms of body painting (Polhemus, 1988; Polhemus & Proctor, 1978). Conventions of dress transform flesh into something recognizable and meaningful to a culture and are also the means by which bodies are made 'decent', appropriate and acceptable within specific contexts. Dress does not merely serve to protect our modesty and does not simply reflect a natural body or, for that matter, a given identity; it embellishes the body, the materials commonly used adding a whole array of meanings to the body that would otherwise not be there (Entwistle, 2000: 323–324).

Of course, in comparison to language, dress is low (in semantic terms) in its ability to convey specific meaning. Fred Davis argues, in his seminal text, that this does not suggest our choice of clothing (or the style we might employ) cannot communicate, rather, he labels them a 'quasi-code' (in semiotics terms) (Davis, 1993: 5). Davis elaborates on his label when he suggests 'that although it draws on the conventional visual and tactile symbols of culture it does so allusively, ambiguously, and inchoately so that the meanings evoked by the combinations and permutations of the code's keys (*i.e.* fabric, texture, colour, pattern, volume, silhouette and occasion) are forever shifting and in process' (Davis, 1993: 5). The sociologist Diana Crane amplifies this further suggesting that we should interpret dress not as a 'closed text' like language (that is, with relatively stable/fixed meanings) but rather as 'open texts' — those that constantly acquire new meanings.

Crane (2000) provides two everyday clothing examples of firstly an open and then a closed item of clothing that amplify her assessment. The first example is 'denim jeans' and throughout the twentieth century, Crane argues, this garment has continually acquired new meanings — from rebellion to leisure, and more recently, designer item (Crane, 2000: 243). The current range of denim jeans from 'high-street' to 'designer branded' is an example of an 'open' text item. All of our audience will recognize the item as a pair of denim jeans but only some (and this is likely to vary according to the characteristics of the audience) will appreciate the value of the brand labeling the designer jeans. This example contrasts with another example, this time 'closed', and one suitable example is the 'black leather jacket' that again has been in existence for a comparable period to the denim jeans but unlike this item the black leather jacket seems to have maintained one meaning throughout this period — that of, rebellion.

Of course, in the current context of an increasingly homogenized world and market place (in terms of clothing and dress) this amplifies the potential effectiveness of this form of public communication. Not least, the currency of brands now act as forms of low semantic communication — for example some brands are associated with luxury and class (*e.g.* Hermes) whilst others are associated with high-street and volume (*e.g.* Prada; H&M). So if we observe people wearing them we can interpret that either that they are affluent or that they aspire to that form of identity. In the next section we move to examining the notion of intentionality.

## INTENTIONALITY, EXPRESSION AND PERCEPTION

The Latin etymological origin of the word 'intentionality' suggests it is derivative from the verb: *tendere* — which means: 'direction of or of the mind (their emphasis), attention, eyes, *etc.* to an object' (*Oxford English dictionary*). That is, broadly speaking, intentionality is interested in the relationship between our own mental states and external objects/events (outside the body). The philosopher Franz Brentano had provided an introduction to the concept of intentionality in the nineteenth century, and following a lengthy description, summarized his understanding of the guise of this concept through 'two metaphors', namely: directed towards something and as of or about something (Brentano, 1973). Brentano described intentionality as a 'mental phenomena (with) reference to a content, direction towards an object' and by saying that 'they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves' (Brentano, 1973: 88–89). Reuter raises her concerns with this description when she adds: 'The two metaphors of being directed and of or about are usually seen as describing the same relation, even though the meaning of being directed towards something and being about something are quite different' (Reuter, 1999: 69).

Merleau-Ponty avoided this contention by focusing his response towards examining the concept of 'intentionality' in terms of its relationships within the epistemological position of the lived world. Following the writings of Edmund Husserl, he concentrated his attention on what Husserl had labeled 'operational intentionality'. This focus, Merleau-Ponty claimed, places emphasis on the qualities of the object or event in everyday life rather than allow it to be objectified via traditional forms of knowing. Merleau-Ponty developed Husserl's claims further by suggesting that our focus should start at the 'body subject's concrete, spatial and pre-reflective directedness towards the lived world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962: 150; Reuter, 1999: 72). His assumption was governed by two stark realizations, namely: if we were to examine intentionality from only the cognitive then this removes it from

everyday life and may suggest that intentionality possesses no real world value; likewise, if we were to restrict our inspection from only the real world then we might fail to comprehend the nature of purposeful action and perhaps likewise, inaction. In these circumstances, Merleau-Ponty concluded that we should not assess or restrict our examination of intentionality from purely the perspective of the mind and or simply observe the actions of the body without grounding it within the cognitive. Rather, for him, his understanding suggested it was closer to a form of ‘intertwining’ relationship — of the mind with the body — as we engage with everyday life (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962: 62). Merleau-Ponty later in his writing career reinforces his position when he writes:

The intentionality that ties together the stages of my exploration, the aspects of the thing, and the two series to each other is neither the mental subject’s connecting activity nor the ideal connections of the object. It is the transition that as a carnal subject I effect from one phase of movement to another, a transition which as a matter of principle is always possible for me because I am that animal of perceptions and movements called a body (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 167).

Merleau-Ponty’s underlying claim for the lived body is that it is ‘an expressive space’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962: 146) from which we act intentionally. Mike Dillon provides a nice summary of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of lived space:

it is oriented around both the physical structure of the body and the projects undertaken to fulfill the needs of the body. Thus, near and far, accessible and inaccessible, within reach and out of touch, *etc.* can be described in terms of body motility [...] the crucial point here is the claim that the body has its own intentionality, one that is prior to and independent of any symbolic function, categorical attitude or intelligible condition of consciousness conceived as representation (Dillon, 1988: 135).

This explicit understanding allows us to distinguish between the qualities of the practical from its counterpart abstract space, and as our discussion will prove, will be fundamental to ensuing examination in this paper. However, at this stage, let me briefly distinguish between these two classifications of space and, in accordance with the exemplar of this paper, this will be made through the auspices of the body. Our fingers and hands possess many qualities and amongst these is the facility to ‘point’ and ‘grasp’. In order to appreciate the significance of this observation let me firstly rehearse a further quote from Dillon:

Empiricism is correct in claiming that bodily movements are motivated, that they are responsive to a transcendent state of affairs and are not purely self-initiated fiats of an



immanent agency, but fails to see that the attempt to explain them simply as response to physiological stimuli is reductive and inadequate (Dillon, 1988: 135–136).

The background Dillon elaborates above provides the foundation to how we should appreciate the difference between pointing and grasping and their relationship to bodily and categorical intentionality. Let me clarify my understanding of the characteristics of these two labels through a simple everyday clothing example (and it is one that I shall return to repeatedly throughout the rest of the paper): imagine if you were going shopping and upon entering a store you notice, hanging on the other side of the showroom, a dress that you identify as being ideal for your needs. At this moment, in identifying the item, you have figuratively 'pointed'<sup>1</sup> to it hanging there and identified that it fulfils your need (this is categorical intentionality) and should you decide to move your body towards the item of clothing for a closer inspection. Your movement and your subsequent 'grasping' of the item (this time with your hand) as you hold it up for closer scrutiny reveals bodily intentionality. We will return to this classification in the discussion section below.

However, for Merleau-Ponty his assessment of intentionality does not conclude from simply appreciating the above linear, sequential relationship. Towards the later part of his writings he started to appreciate different, more multifarious, layers of assessment. Layers of assessment, in terms of our discussion, that challenges these 'unidirectional' assumptions. Sue Cataldi agrees and noted that our traditional examination of intentionality tends to 'flatten out or narrow our "perspective" (her emphasis), blinding us to the lateral or hidden dimensions of these "objects" (again her emphasis) and to the extent of their embeddedness, in each other and in us' (Cataldi, 1993: 59). Cataldi proceeds further in drawing on the writings of Remigius C. Kwant whom in his examination of the last years of Merleau-Ponty's life suggested:

With the focus of our attention only on the frontal aspects of appearing reality, we only see the opposition between the subject and object. Our eyes thus close to what Merleau-Ponty considers the most essential truth, viz., the intrinsic connection between subject and object. The term 'connection' (his emphasis) is ambiguous, since every philosopher who accepts a doctrine of intentionality will admit that subject and object are connected. Merleau-Ponty means something more. According to him the connection consists mainly in the fact that the opposed terms belong to one and the same reality. The opposition is not just a kind of unity, of togetherness, but takes place within a unity which precedes and exceeds the opposition. This unity cannot be directly observed. It is not an object itself, since it involves the subject also. It is not a phenomenon, but it co-appears in all phenomena and makes phenomena possible. It is the 'quasi-object' of lateral awareness (Kwant, 1966: 221).

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<sup>1</sup> I do acknowledge that not everyone in every circumstance would necessarily use their fingers to point. In perceptual terms it is entirely possible to only employ our eyes to point and achieve the same understanding.

Thus intentional thoughts and acts concludes Merleau-Ponty do not necessarily occur in isolation, or for that matter, always in states of unidirectional linear causality. Rather, in everyday life, intentions can be cognitively considered concurrently, that is, in terms where they are closer to a form of co-existence — perhaps fighting for attention among many competitors that look to battle for recognition in order to gain higher levels of scrutiny or priority; for example, when crossing from the cognitive to everyday life, our perceptions are challenged, and different options and opportunities emerge from our actual experience of being-in-the-world. Once in this physical space we are exposed to quite different sets of opportunities to that which might have considered if we remained entirely at the cognitive (for example: sale items, advice from friends *etc.*) and these are further complicated by other ‘cross-intentional’ features<sup>2</sup> (for example: time and urgency of an upcoming event, prioritizing of resource availability, *etc.*).

This description further reinforces Merleau-Ponty’s position regarding ‘intertwining’<sup>3</sup> that is, where the cognitive (abstract space) is collaborating with the physical mobility of the body (practical space). This is further amplified if we delve deeper into Merleau-Ponty’s later writings when he adds further layers of complexification: for example, the realization that not all of these factors and options are necessarily immediately accessible to our perceptive capabilities. Merleau-Ponty’s last (posthumous) text was entitled *The visible and the invisible*.<sup>4</sup> This is a very complex text that unfortunately was unfinished at the time of his early death — but from the fragments and notes he left, it would seem that the title refers (in crude terms) to an understanding that what we can perceive as part of ‘being-in-the-world’ is informed by other features that are both embedded and ‘hidden’ from immediate view. Thus the visible is informed by that which Merleau-Ponty elaborates is embedded ‘in-the-visible’. It is the convergence of these explanations together with the assessment made by Cataldi (1993: 59) of Kwant’s last few words, namely, ‘quasi-object’ of lateral awareness (Kwant, 1966: 221) that steer the final paragraphs of this section towards, perhaps, Merleau-Ponty’s most difficult concept — that of ‘flesh’. This is difficult to explain as Merleau-Ponty notes there is not an equivalent elsewhere in philosophy. However, according to Fred Evans, Merleau-Ponty develops the idea that our bodies and the world are two aspects of a single reality: ‘flesh’ (Evans, 2008: 187) — that is, where the seer passes into the visible

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<sup>2</sup> I write the label ‘cross-intentional’ here to suggest that our intentions can be further complicated by ‘counter’ intentions that may have higher or comparable influence.

<sup>3</sup> In his later writings Merleau-Ponty continues to develop his arguments still with this assumption at the forefront of his thinking.

<sup>4</sup> I have amplified elsewhere that my understanding of this relationship (visible and invisible) is more accurately one of ‘visible and in-the-visible’ and for me this is a significant distinction.

and likewise the visible into the seer and in this reciprocal exchange the question who is the seer and who is the seen becomes blurred. For me, I link this to another of Merleau-Ponty's final thoughts:

We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body; or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 138).

'Flesh' for Merleau-Ponty then is not that which encases my body but that which encases the world in which we live. Sue Cataldi (1993: 59) may note (as we noted above) that intentionality tends to 'flatten out or narrow our "perspective"' (her emphasis), but concurrently for Merleau-Ponty, 'flesh' exceeds the perceptive relationship between the 'seer' and the 'seen' but also including that which surrounds (or contextualizes) it.

Rene Barbaras understands this as: 'the concretion of every vision, the precession or latency of all sense', he adds a little later, for Merleau-Ponty then understanding 'intentionality as being through the notion of flesh' (Barbaras, 2004: 170).

## DISCUSSION

Merleau-Ponty's claim that our lived bodies are an 'expressive space' from which we act intentionally (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962: 146) represents the rationale for this paper. Intentionality lies at the core of a discussion of perception and as such it is a useful concept for examination because increasing our understanding of it enables to appreciate how and why act the way we do. I started this paper by posing an everyday question that I argue is both accessible and relevant to many of us in our everyday lives: 'What to wear?' I hope to demonstrate that this most basic of questions provides a valuable exemplar for the examination of intentionality. I will further argue that this question provides a rich challenge to the largely theoretical writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to reveal multiple layers in exemplifying the concept of intentionality. My task, in this section, is to amplify these layers through the synthesis of the aforementioned clothing example with the themes introduced in foregoing sections. The structure of this section, despite my earlier claim (following Merleau-Ponty) that we should view understandings intertwined is, for ease of explanation, crudely organised into four categories.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I have presented this discussion according to these categories to attempt to reduce the complexity of our discussion — however, it should be stressed it should not be presumed that this reflects the guise of intentionality in everyday life.

The categories below represent the distinction introduced above, namely: attention to private and public audiences and then explore each of these via practical and abstract space. These are summarised in the figure below.

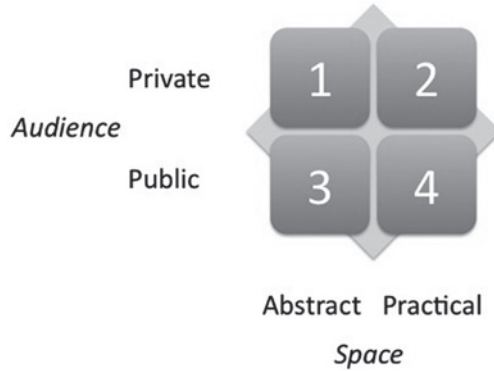


Figure 1. Categories for examining Clothing and Intentionality

## 1. PRIVATE AUDIENCE — ABSTRACT SPACE

Brentano introduced intentionality through the metaphors of a way being about or of something, that is: to perceive something, and: ‘reference to a content, direction towards an object’ and defined ‘mental phenomena by saying that they are those phenomena which contain an object intentionally within themselves’ (Brentano, 1973: 88–89). This category examines what might be described as pure intentional thoughts. As it has been frequently suggested above Merleau-Ponty was uncomfortable with attention in people-based contexts remaining at this level. Our examination of ‘pure intending’ limits itself to a private audience (myself) and cannot simply be reduced to intentions prior to action.<sup>6</sup> The claim here is that I am able to contemplate and rehearse intentions that are divorced from action — even if, in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty, the thoughts may refer to ‘objects’ or ‘events’ in-the-world.

Let me enlarge by returning to the clothing example introduced in the previous section: let me continue with the imagined scenario that I go shopping for an item of clothing — In a particular store I identify something that I feel might work for me — at this moment I have not moved my body towards it

<sup>6</sup> Dillon (1988: 165–166) enlarges: ‘If one makes an ontological distinction between seer and seen, body as subject and body as object (as did Sartre), then solipsism is the inevitable result. Husserl explains that solipsism means — for me *my* existence and that of *my* mental states. Existence is everything that I experience — Husserl argued it was limited to a “thought experiment” (Husserl, 1980: 81)’.

— I have 'pointed' to it in my abstract space — it remains purely a cognitive rehearsal. In the last section we noted that this form of intentionality is known as: 'categorical intentionality'. My understanding of categorical intentionality suggests this is a form of understanding that is analogous to understanding the state of affairs that guides the individual. Therefore, as I look at the item hanging there against the wall and consider it carefully in my private cognitive space, rehearsing how and why it might fulfill my aim. My cognitive considerations revolve around my considering why I might purchase it for wear. I ask myself a number of critical questions including: can I afford it? will it suit me? will its purchase and my eventual wearing of the item fulfill my aims? Following these questions and my seemingly internal responses to these questions suggest that if I were then to remain unconvinced, then I will look to 'point' (within my abstract space) elsewhere towards an alternative item. Therefore, at this level, what we as individuals are cognitively rehearsing is what Merleau-Ponty labeled the 'intentional arc'. He elaborates:

'intentional arc' (his emphasis) which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather results in or being situated in all these respects. It is the intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962: 136).

In this category, intentionality remains divorced from reality — purely a cognitive contemplation. In the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's approach, its value is limited to a simple rehearsal, one that merely provides a context/foundation for the next category 2. Of course without it — then category 2 cannot full grasp the value of intentions within what Merleau-Ponty labeled: 'the body schema'. The body schema is the crux or reference point that establishes a stable perceptual background against which we should perceive and respond to changes and movements in our environment, and thereby opens us onto a world of other selves. As Merleau-Ponty would say later, 'It is the hinge of the "for itself" and the "for the other"' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 189).

## 2. PRIVATE AUDIENCE — PRACTICAL SPACE

The introduction of the body schema for the first two categories is important. For the body schema provides the foundation to our knowing and acting in different everyday actions and guides us in 'being-in-the-world'. This schema is crucial to our sense of personal identity and unity of things and is the product of our prior and existing co-ordination of our cognitive with our bodily functions. The concept of intentionality dovetails into this understanding. As Merleau-Ponty enlarges: 'our body is not the object of an "I think": it

is an ensemble of lived meanings that finds its equilibrium' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962: 153). An equilibrium that suggests to me that translates intentionality as providing both direction and purpose. All of us, require (at some time) some form of purpose — the alternative, if the individual does not possess this direction, might suggest a gathering of evidence of physical inaction or perhaps aspects of vacuous thought.

In the previous section we noted the two key features of 'abstract' and 'lived space', that of, 'pointing' and 'grasping'. In the former level we explored 'pointing' and now we turn our attention toward 'grasping'. The focus here remains at the level of the private audience but this time in practical space. Here there is no intention to remain at the level of 'pure' intention rather I am involved in 'body intentionality'.

In order to elaborate this further, I return to the store example, but now instead of 'pointing' toward a different item (as suggested in the previous category), imagine that I have now decided that the original piece of clothing that I identified earlier is worth 'trying-on (rehearsing for size/feel on my body) — so accordingly, I have moved my body into the changing room. Let me enlarge: I am assessing the item of clothing being worn on my body in the reflection of the mirror<sup>7</sup> — I can use my eyes to look at my reflection as I am trying-it-on — but as I employ my eyes I realize that my vision is restricted to that profile that I can see in the reflection. I might shift my body to look at different profile, perhaps to the side or turn right round and attempt to cast my eyes over my shoulder. However for that moment again I can only see in the reflection one profile. Furthermore, I realise as I stand in that private changing room looking at my profile that I am not only relying only on my visual assessment. I am naturally employing my other senses to assist me. I note in the reflection, perhaps unconsciously, that I am employing my fingers to touch the surface of the clothing, perhaps to stroke/smooth its creases, or to adjust its fabric on my body, I can concurrently also hear the scratching of my fingers over the surface of the fabric. Furthermore, I find that I am wriggling to get more comfortable wearing the item in order for to fit or hang better on my body. These actions are taking place as I employ my eyes to look at my reflection — this is a complex collection — in these moments, what I am experiencing at this private level is a form of intertwining as suggested by Merleau-Ponty where my cognitive intentions are now merging with the additional physical experience of wearing the item of clothing. I am physically performing 'bodily' intentionality but this is intertwined with my categorical intentional assessment. As a result, I can now make a more informed assessment of comparing

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<sup>7</sup> For Merleau-Ponty the mirror is narcissus (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962: 256) and he also argued that 'the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 255).

my private contemplated intentions (categorical intentionality), that I formed in the abstract space, with the experience I am feeling and the intentions that I am both drawing from at the abstract level and projecting in terms of practice for the future. Here we see a form a temporality underpinning this process of examination and one that seemingly reflects evidence of the aforementioned intentional arc. A process of reaching back into and assessing this experience in light of my understandings generated from my body schema and forward into notions of public space.

### 3. PUBLIC AUDIENCE — ABSTRACT SPACE

This third category turns our attention from private (myself) towards public audiences (outside myself) — however, I will examine in this category from the perspective of abstract space: that is, the space where I cognitively ‘rehearse’ my intentions prior to wearing the item of clothing for public consumption. This is an important category to examine — not least, in terms of our continuing example (selecting to buy and then wearing an item of clothing) its projected relationship between my cognitive thoughts and my assessment of its effect in a public space, and the realization that this requires a quite different set of considerations to the preparation described above for private space. In this category, following on from the previous category where I projected back my thoughts to my body schema, here my intentional arc now projects forward into anticipating the reaction and response from the audience.

Of course, as we noted above the effectiveness of communication in terms of public audiences, especially for items that are low in semantic terms such as clothing, that this might have a direct effect on the congruence of understanding between what was intended by the wearer, to that which is interpreted by the audience. It was suggested above that a significant factor would likely be the familiarity (or not) of the public audience.

Let me enlarge, if I expect the audiences to be relatively familiar (*i.e.* in a work setting with recognizable colleagues *etc.* or perhaps socially with close friends) then I will be more confident that my choice of clothing to wear and the familiarity of the audience will aid my intentionality and I am likely to find choosing something to wear<sup>8</sup> less problematic as I am reasonably confident that the intended message of my dress will be understood/appreciated by this known audience. However, if I were facing a day where I were to face less familiar audiences, then it is likely I would be more cautious with my intended dress and perhaps conforming to general societal norms of accepted wear in

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<sup>8</sup> For whatever reason perhaps reflecting my personality, or my humour, or my aspirations — or simply something that conforms to perception of what would fit into the context with which I am familiar.

these situations. Unless, of course, if my intention were to employ my dress as a statement that deliberately is intended to challenge thinking then I might employ a radical look and wear something radical to gain more than normal attention (for example, as a protest or an alliance with a pressure group *etc.* or event to reflect a type of fashion, *etc.*).

However, if my intent is to comply with standard cultural norms — say for example, I were going to work then I would wear things that were consistent with the cultural norms of my employing organization. This realization reinforces Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility — in that as a person acting within a public audience, I am looking to assess my position in it — not in a position of power — but as a person that 'fits' and complies with social norms and cultural expectations.

Of course, my description here does seem to conform to normal dualist descriptions, in this case, between my body and the world — and partly it is a response to traditional examinations of intersubjectivity (Stawarska, 2002) yet as our above examination noted, this was not the perspective that drove Merleau-Ponty's later writings. For him, the introduction of 'flesh' represents a different ontological position that challenges intersubjectivity and whereby the body is a rich 'conduit' of sensibility amongst a network of reversible and pervasive relations. As we noted above,<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty called for us to move beyond the 'box-like' mentalities of labeling our perceptual positioning and employ our abstract states in a way that grasps our existence in the world. Yet not in a way that seemingly suggests that we can ever hope to fully grasp the other.

Let me provide a brief response to the notion of the 'other', Merleau-Ponty in his final writings attempted to move away from some of his mentor's (Husserl)<sup>10</sup> arguments to suggest that seeing should not be understood not as simply an internal subjective act. Thus amongst his responses is the concept that he entitled: *ineinander* and for him this is a 'connective tissue', which is neither object nor subject (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 174) it is a form of collaboration or what he labeled a 'co-functioning' of myself and the other. Let me elaborate further, whilst my body might be shaped in a similar fashion to your

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<sup>9</sup> 'We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body; or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 138).

<sup>10</sup> Broadly Husserl's argument is as follows: in order for me to be able to put myself into someone else's shoes and simulate his (or her) perspective upon his surrounding spatio-temporal world, I cannot but assume that this world coincides with my own, at least to a large extent; although the aspects under which the other subject represents the world must be different, as they depend on his own egocentric viewpoint. Hence, I must presuppose that the spatio-temporal objects forming my own world exist independently of my subjective perspective and the particular experiences I perform; they must, in other words, be conceived of as part of an objective reality (Stanford online *Encyclopedia of philosophy*).



own, your body is not my body and therefore I am unable to experience your body in the same way that I experience my own — in short, for Merleau-Ponty, whilst we are part of the same flesh I can never collapse my understanding of the other's situation entirely.<sup>11</sup> This is significant here for our discussion of intentionality for public audiences for it highlights the limits of knowing about the 'other' in terms of the relationship between cognitive and physical space.

#### 4. PUBLIC AUDIENCE — PRACTICAL SPACE

In this final category my intentions are rehearsed for public audiences in a practical space. This is a critical category as it is distinguishable from the previous three where I was active in formulating my intentions, whereas, here, in this final category, I am becoming more passive. This may be a surprising assessment to read, but my understanding is now that because my cognitive categorical intentional role has imparted its assessment, and I am now wearing the item of clothing as evidence of body intentionality. As a result, in this public space, scrutiny by the audience has wrestled activity away from me towards themselves. I am passive as the evidence of my intentions is paraded on my body in this public space and whilst I continue to wear these I cannot deny or shift my intentional decisions,

The evidence of my intentions are apparent whilst I continue to wear the clothing and I have no understanding of its success unless I verbally ask the audience or alternatively interpret the visible audience reaction. However, I note (again from Merleau-Ponty) that these assessments are embedded in a context that lies beneath and beyond (in-the-visible) the event that I am engaged with at this moment in time. It is the type of circumstance that suggests to me that Merleau-Ponty might have considered 'flesh' in terms of episodes. Episodes of being characterized by relational engagements and that change and evolve as the character of the flesh moves with the on-going nature of the events. Thus flesh is dynamic, it is a form of negotiated reality and that once an episode concludes (say for example, the scrutiny has concluded and I return to my own private space), this represents a temporary closure for this episode and I can then reflect on how I felt the effectiveness of my dress communication was interpreted, by both myself and the public audience, so I can then use this assessment for the new process that starts again the next day.

The evidence of my choice of dress can be traced back to my intentions. What was I striving to achieve through this choice of dress? For me, my dressed

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<sup>11</sup> 'I shall never in all strictness be able to think the other person's thought. I can think that he thinks [...] on the other hand, I know unquestionably that that man over there sees, that my sensible world is also his, because I am present at his seeing, it is visible in his eyes grasp of the scene' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 169).

body possesses a coherence of style (perhaps analogous to a work of art) that I must acknowledge that it is simply an expressive vehicle from my particular point of view:

the lived body is not just an array of parts and functions, but a synergic unity linked by carnal intentional mappings [...], a melodic unfolding of a point of view, a distinctive way of being (Singer, 1981: 241, 242).

My preceding discussion has frequently argued that my status as a body within the world is but one among many and that my intentions in dress (like in so many other areas) is rarely unique to me. I am aware that I am influenced by others in much the same way as (I hope) I influence others. Of course, despite these observations, not least coupled by the early observation that dress itself is low semantic value, it is as Dillon observes a problem of symmetry versus asymmetry in reversibility — he continues:

Indeed, it is the very desire to see ourselves as Others see us that motivates the development of reflective awareness. The point to be driven home is that flesh must be understood as primordially dehiscent (Dillon, 1988: 167).

I am aware that my choice of clothing on my body might well be resultant from a negotiated collection of cross-intentions. That is, my choice results from the practical considerations compromise necessitated by budget, time, counter-objectives, cultural norms *etc.* Or alternatively, it is a high priority and represents a message that I intend to convey to this array of public audiences. Dillon offers in a section examining ‘implications of the reversibility thesis’ that ‘I see the Other and the Other sees me: but I do not experience my being seen as s/he does. A literal reversal of roles is impossible’ (Dillon, 1988:174).

## CONCLUSION

Merleau-Ponty poses a question in his essay entitled: *The philosopher and his shadow* that seemingly responds to the traditional examinations of intentionality, he rhetorically asks: ‘What will intentionality be then if it is no longer the mind’s grasping of an aspect of sensible matter as the exemplification of an essence, no longer the recognition in things of what we have put there?’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 167). Merleau-Ponty naturally offers a response that challenges this traditional of being ‘at a distance’, and one that is only ‘half opened before us’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 167). For me, I am persuaded by Mike Dillon’s conclusion (unlike many) that interprets Merleau-Ponty to have based his entire phenomenological project (both early and later writings) on an account of bodily intentionality and even in his later writings (where he

seemingly becomes less enchanted with phenomenology) he continues to challenge traditional understandings as offering any adequate explanation of intentionality through the concept of mind.

The forgoing sections have provided the context to the opening question: 'what to wear?' and at the beginning of the paper I claimed that the act of dressing our bodies is evidence of intentional expression before different audiences (private and public). My reasoning is that dress is valuable in that it provides rich examples of Merleau-Ponty's approach to intentionality. This is significant as there are few examples where the same exemplar can be used to reveal the process from cognition through to examining it in practice. I also felt that an everyday example would also make Merleau-Ponty's writings more accessible to wider audiences. It might appear to be unusual to select clothing/dress as the exemplar as this subject is not normally appropriated for such explanations but in a context of the increasing presence of consumerism and interdisciplinarity in academia I feel it provides a rich and yet largely undeveloped set of opportunities for future examination.

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