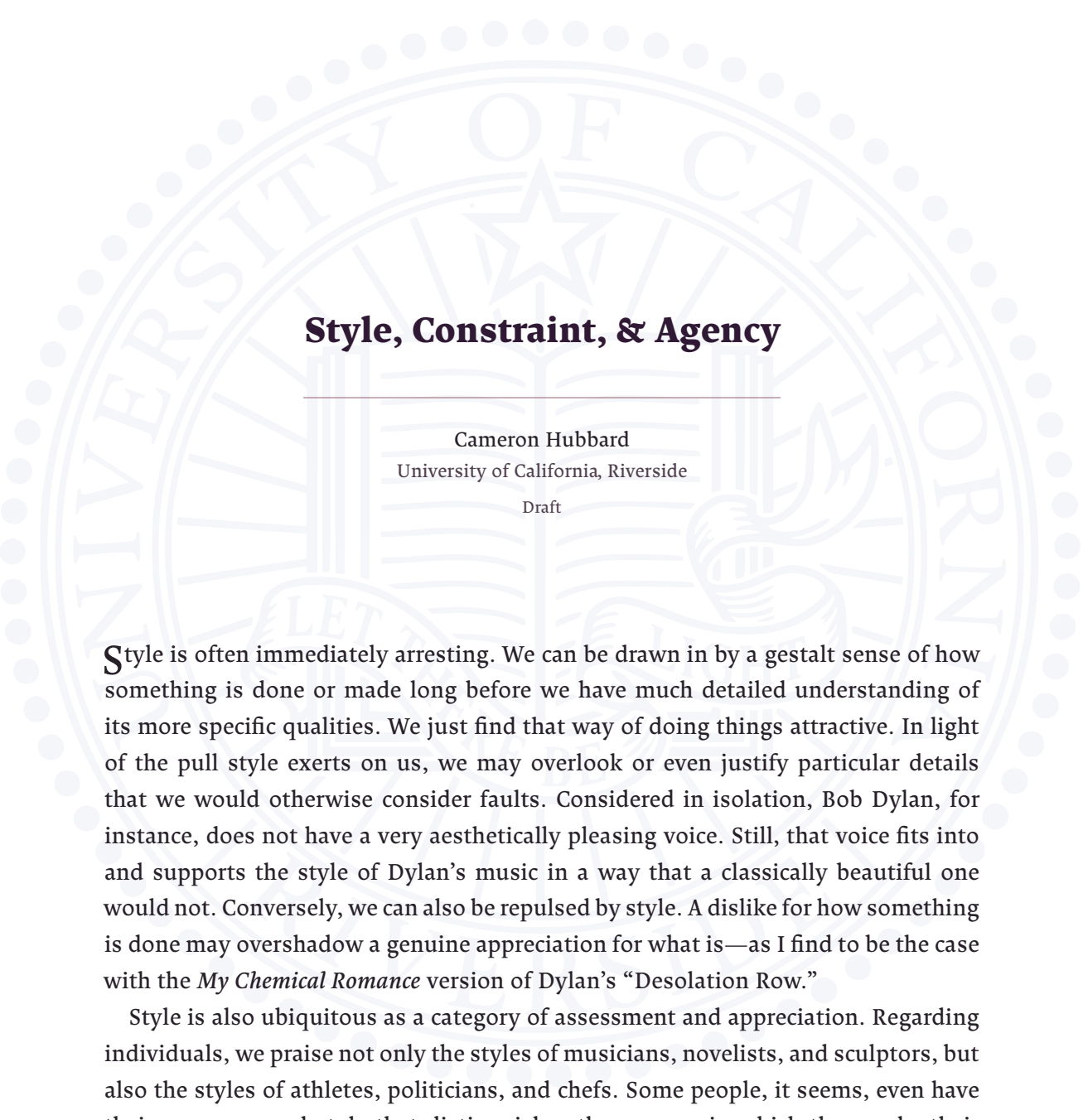


The background of the page features a large, light gray watermark of the University of California seal. The seal is circular, with the words "UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA" around the top and "LET THERE BE LIGHT" around the bottom. In the center is a five-pointed star above an open book.

Style, Constraint, & Agency

Cameron Hubbard

University of California, Riverside

Draft

Style is often immediately arresting. We can be drawn in by a gestalt sense of how something is done or made long before we have much detailed understanding of its more specific qualities. We just find that way of doing things attractive. In light of the pull style exerts on us, we may overlook or even justify particular details that we would otherwise consider faults. Considered in isolation, Bob Dylan, for instance, does not have a very aesthetically pleasing voice. Still, that voice fits into and supports the style of Dylan's music in a way that a classically beautiful one would not. Conversely, we can also be repulsed by style. A dislike for how something is done may overshadow a genuine appreciation for what is—as I find to be the case with the *My Chemical Romance* version of Dylan's "Desolation Row."

Style is also ubiquitous as a category of assessment and appreciation. Regarding individuals, we praise not only the styles of musicians, novelists, and sculptors, but also the styles of athletes, politicians, and chefs. Some people, it seems, even have their own personal style that distinguishes the manner in which they make their way through the world. Muhammad Ali's style was quick, clever, and proud. Lyndon Johnson's was blunt and domineering. Dolly Parton's is ostentatious but friendly.

How you feel about any of these individuals will typically have something to do with whether you like their style.

We do not, however, only talk about the style of particular individuals. We also consider style in our assessments of groups, communities, and even time periods—as when we say the Outlaw Country movement of the 1970s was characterized by a deliberately unpolished approach to production or that early analytic philosophy aimed to be less esoteric than other philosophical movements—and eras—as in the loose-fitting clothes of 2000s youth fashion.

The aim of this paper is to advance a new theory of what a style is. I call this the *Agential Theory of Style*, and I will be specifically concerned to argue that it is preferable to the two other major theories of personal and artistic style on offer: the *Personality Theory* and the *Ideals Theory*. However, considerations like the above also suggest two general questions about style that we are likely to want answered. The first is why it is that style matters to us. The second is whether, in all these different contexts, we are really talking about the same thing.

A comprehensive answer to the former will be outside the scope of this paper. What makes style compelling is likely to turn on the specifics of what it is, and so the present work needs to be done first. For the sake of that, I will take for granted several desiderata about style that any account needs to capture, some of which are related to why and how style matters, e.g., that an artistic style is an achievement. I hope doing so in the absence of a principled justification or explanation of the significance of style is not too unreasonable, since for many people, style seems to wear its significance on its sleeve.¹

The latter I will address. The recent philosophical literature makes a distinction between the style of individuals and the styles of groups or communities and is primarily devoted to explaining the former. Still, this is also generally framed as a subdivision within a single concept, such that general and individual style are deeply related. Unfortunately, neither major account of style does much to explain that connection or to defend the unity of style in this respect. Fortunately, I think that the *Agential Theory* does explain the unity of style. If I am right about this, then that it does so is a core part of the argument for why it is the preferable account.

Let me briefly map the argument of the paper. I begin in §1 with an intuitive characterization of style, according to which style is fundamentally adverbial, i.e., a way of doing. I further argue that a style is a way of settling what is left undetermined by general constraints of the activity. Drawing on the literature, I then differentiate style from signature and make the important distinction between general style and

1. Among philosophers to whom its significance was obviously apparent we can count figures as distinct as Nietzsche, who boldly asserted that “one thing is useful— to give style to one’s character” and Confucius; cf. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*: 290 and Graham (2006, p. 25-38)— drawing from *Analects* 1:12, 10:2, 13:4, 15:17, 15:18, 17:19 especially.

individual style on the grounds that only the latter is psychologically real. The paper focuses on a theory of individual style and its psychological reality from this point until near the end of the paper.

In §2, I discuss the two major philosophical accounts of individual style. Both claim that individual style is expressive of a fact about the possessor of that style. The *Personality Theory* holds that individual style expresses the implied personality of its possessor. In contrast, the *Ideals Theory* claims that what a style expresses about the person who possesses it is not personality but rather their ideals. I argue that both of these theories face major objections. Reflecting on insights from Nietzsche and Kendall Walton, I suggest that we should reorient our analysis of style so that it focuses less on expression of facts about the possessor of a style and more on their stylistic activity.

The Agential Theory of Style does this by grounding the possession of an individual style in the agency underwriting stylistic activity. The claim is that individual style is realized in agency by a specific type of layered agential structure, which I use C. Thi Nguyen's recent work on layered agency to characterize. This structure helps explain many of the important features of individual style, but it also promises a more unified theory of style than is presently on offer. Avowedly, neither of the extant theories of individual style extend to general style. I conclude by suggesting, however, that there is some reason to believe the Agential Theory can make sense of both in the same terms and, in doing so, explicate the relationship between them.

§ I THE CHARACTERISTICS OF STYLE

Style is the topic of this paper, and since I take it to be a very broad-ranging concept, it is worth saying something about what I take style to be. This provides a starting point as well as evidence for some descriptive claims that a philosophical theory of style has to explain. Ideally, those will naturally or aptly fit with the gloss I am about to give. Throughout the paper, I try to bring out that connection whenever doing so does not distract from the larger project. However, what I say about the nature of style in this section is not intended to be comprehensive. Many nuances are left up to a full-blown theory of style for explanation. In support of these, I largely appeal to our intuitive grasp of the concept.

Another reason for starting here is to address concerns about whether style is a single or unified concept, i.e., the appropriate object of the philosophical theorizing I and others subject it to. Although the unity of style as a concept is something that the contemporary philosophical literature has largely taken for granted, I will concede the possibility that there are multiple senses of “style” that bear only a family resemblance to each other. However, I also think that there is a primary sense.

I take it that is all we need, since this primary sense of style, which I will now attempt to describe, *is* unified in subject matter. Moreover, it remains broad in scope, and I think other theorists of style would agree that it is what they have been concerned with.

In this “primary” sense, style describes particular ways of doing, creating, representing, and so on—generally with respect to an activity or artifact. It is one aspect under which an activity or artifact can be viewed, and that aspect is fundamentally “adverbial.” Philosophical authors are explicit that they conceive of style as what we might call a “way of doing,” but there is also reason to think that this is the main ordinary sense of the word.

Apart from the fact that linguistic intuitions support this, the adverbial conception of style is deeply rooted in the history of the word. In tracing the genealogy of the concept, Ernst Gombrich points out that the Latin “stilus,” a writing instrument, could also refer to an author’s manner of writing or speaking, especially in connection to *decorum*, the capacity to choose words in terms of connotation and pathos.²³

Gombrich’s modern definition of style preserves the adverbial emphasis. According to that definition, style is “any distinctive, and therefore recognizable, way in which an act is performed or an artifact made or ought to be performed and made.”²⁴ A less erudite source, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, agrees. The *OED* lists style as “a particular mode or form of skilled construction, execution, or production; the manner in which a work of art is executed...”²⁵ Both definitions characteristically relate style to activity. Of course, we speak just as often about the styles of an artifact. In general, artifacts inherit style from the activity that produces them. Although, we will see shortly that this inheritance is not as straightforward as might be immediately thought.

Still, to just say that style is adverbial and involves “ways of doing” may seem vague. One could think it ambiguous whether stylistic ways of doing include things like formal properties or the conventions of a medium. Is a sonnet a style of poetry? Is it part of the style of a slasher movie like “Friday the 13th” that Jason always kills most of the teens? Or are these things not styles because they are just part of what it is to belong to a certain type of poem or genre of movie?

There is also the issue of what Nelson Goodman calls *signature*. Signature is any feature of a work that, by virtue of being characteristic or repeated, points to the

2. Gombrich (1968, p. 130-131).

3. Our word “style” is a direct descendant of “stilus” through Middle French. Gombrich (1968, p. 131) dates the establishment of “style” as a term of art history to 1765 with the publication of J.J. Winckelmann’s *History of the Art of Antiquity* cf. Winckelmann (2006).

4. Gombrich (1968, p. 129).

5. *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Style”.

identity of the creator or performer of the work.⁶ Obviously, literal signatures are included here. But many other properties of a work can aid in its attribution, and it does not always seem right to call each an element of style. The type of paper or paint used, the slight statistical favoring of some words, the clothes a musician wears on stage—in some cases, these are clearly elements of style. However, they are plausibly not so in others. I have been to concerts where it is clear that everything on stage, from the inter-song banter to the outfits, is part of the show. At others, it is clear that the band is just wearing whatever they happened to have on that day. In that case, I am not inclined to say that their clothes are part of their artistic style.⁷

To address ambiguities like these, let me try to be more precise about how style is adverbial. For this, I think it is helpful to make a rough distinction between two other aspects of activities and artifacts: form and content. In the sense I have in mind, “content” is whatever the activity or artifact substantively consists of. This makes content a very general category with a great variety of ontological diversity. We can talk about content with different emphases and at varying levels of abstraction.

For instance, we could be quite literal in saying that the content of a song is what is instantiated in a particular and concrete performance of it. Then, no other performance of the song will have the same content. We might be a bit less literal and instead say that the content of the song is rather a specific arrangement of lyrics, rhythm, and melody. If we want to be more inclusive, then we could see the content of the song as the lyrics and music within a certain range of similarity.

My thought is not that we must decide which level of abstraction content *really* exists at, but that there is a degree of flexibility here. This flexibility is a virtue because it allows us to talk about content in a variety of different contexts, leaving emphasis and abstraction to be determined as best suits each. However, I will be assuming a minimal level of abstraction because the possibility of sharing content is important for the points I want to make about style.

The “form” of something is the way it is structured or organized. Poetry provides a helpful illustration because poems often exhibit especially clear structures. For example, epic verse in Greek is written in dactylic hexameter—lines made up of six units, each a specific pattern of syllables. So, part of the form of Homer’s *Iliad* is that it is written in dactylic hexameter, while the content of *The Iliad* is what is written about—the rage of Achilles, as the opening lines tell us.

The same distinction is less rigorous but still manifest in many other places. For instance, competent speakers of a language are typically capable of saying the same thing in a formal or informal register. An impressionist and a neoclassical painter

6. Goodman (1975, p. 807-9).

7. Though they could possibly be part of a general personal style.

could both genuinely depict the same tree. Their depictions of the tree will differ, also, from that tree in a work of pointillism.

Generally speaking, the form does not fully determine content. There are other Greek epic poems besides *The Iliad*. Nor does content fully determine form—there are prose narrations of the same events. So, making the distinction between form and content allows us to see that there is a degree of freedom between what *The Iliad* is about and how the poem is structured that has to be navigated in writing the poem. The particular style of *The Iliad* consists in how Homer exercised that freedom in navigating those dual constraints. In effect, I think that to say style is adverbial—“a way of doing”—amounts to the idea that style describes the way what something is about and how it is organized are resolved into the thing itself.

Sometimes, the space of possible resolutions is vast. In Raymond Queneau’s curious book, *Exercises in Style*, there are 99 retellings of a story with the same narrative events in different styles.⁸ Still, it is worth emphasizing that style depends upon only some degree of freedom. So, it is unproblematic that aspects of form and content sometimes do determine one another more strictly.

Elements of form can constrict what it is possible to do. The rules of poker dictate which combinations of cards can be played as hands. Conversely, certain content might be better suited to some forms of representation or expression. *Terza rima* would be poorly suited to a scholarly history of tort law. Likewise, some content may even require specific forms of representation. For instance, many people of a romantic bent have thought that love cannot be described or conveyed directly in language.

Examining the constraints of form and content can settle ambiguities about style. Since style describes how freedom is exercised under constraints, an element of form or content that is required by the nature of the activity or, in some cases, the artifact it aims to produce, will not be an element of style. So, what gets to count as an element of style is relative to what is being done.

If one sets out to write a sonnet, the form of a sonnet is not part of the poem’s style. But if one writes a novel, then the decision to include sonnets at points in the narrative could be a stylistic choice. Nor is the merciless slaughter of victims a stylistic element of “Friday the 13th” because slasher movies *must* have victims, but the specific choices the makers of the film made about who is a victim, how they die, and how that is shown to the viewer can be.

We can give a related response to the question of what differentiates signature from style. When an identifying element of a work is part of how the creator or

8. Interestingly, Queneau’s book inspired the mathematician Philip Ording to write *99 Variations on a Proof*, which correspondingly proves the same theorem in 99 different ways. It would be interesting to think about how the rigorous requirements of mathematics influence the possible exercises of style, but it is not something I will focus on.

performer of the work exercises the freedom left open by the nature of the activity, then it could potentially be part of their style. When an element is identifying, but is not an exercise of freedom in this sense, then it is disqualified. When an illustrator only has access to one kind of paper, then no freedom is exercised. Consequently, no stylistic choice is made. If a variety of different papers are available, then the choice could be stylistic, though I will shortly describe how it could still fail to be.

General Style and Individual Style

Although the philosophical literature treats style as a unified concept, later authors have followed Richard Wollheim in distinguishing within it between styles ascribed to groups, communities, or historical periods and the styles of particular agents. Wollheim calls the former *general style* and the latter *individual style*.⁹

What drives this distinction is the general agreement that more is involved in the possession of one's own individual style than in participating in a shared general style. One facet of this is that we often expect an individual's style to reveal something about who they are. We have that expectation because an individual's style is *their* way of doing things. In our terms, an individual's style is *their* way of exercising freedom under the constraints given by the activity they are engaged in. For the style to really belong to them, they have to be committed to that way of exercising it.

Just doing things some way isn't enough for commitment. As we just saw, in some cases that would only amount to signature. Even where what is characteristic or repeated is a potential ground for style, one could still be indifferent about doing it that way. I do not think we should consider that an element of style either. If it is not a meaningful element of the activity for someone, then it isn't really part of that person's way of doing the activity.

This conclusion leads us to another generally accepted claim. An individual does not automatically have an individual style. Genuine engagement in an activity is possible without possession of individual style. That will be the case whenever anyone fails to possess the right "thick" relationship to their manner of engagement in the activity. The difficulty of attaining that relationship is part of why many writers on style have considered it to be an achievement.

Individual style shapes and guides engagement in the relevant activity. Identity or similarity between individual styles can't be fully assessed from the outside. It requires understanding how the style fits into the psychology of each. Consider Borges'

9. Wollheim (1987, p. 183-6). If there are genuine group agents, then individual style could also be the style of such a group. We would add that general styles belong to communities lacking this unified agency.

famous character Pierre Menard.¹⁰ Menard is a 19th-century writer who, without referring to the original work and from the standpoint of a man living several centuries later, literally rewrites the text of *Don Quixote*. Do Menard and Cervantes possess the same style? Arthur Danto argues that history influences stylistic possibilities by situating the activity within a context that affects how the activity and one's relationship to it can be understood.¹¹ I take him to be right about this, and it gives the correct-seeming answer. Menard and Cervantes do not have the same individual style because they cannot have understood the activity of writing *Don Quixote* in the same way. The Agential Theory of Style will ultimately give the same answer because the differences in their understandings of the activity would be reflected in the character of their agency.

Psychological Reality

Because of the special way individual style is connected to the individual who possesses it, it has received vastly more attention. The current two major theories of style are explicitly theories of individual style. My alternative, the Agential Theory of Style, aims to offer a unified account. If it is right that style is a relatively unified concept, then I think this is a major point in its favor. In that case, we should expect a close relationship between general and individual style. However, to simplify the following discussion, I want to restrict it to individual style. We will return to general style afterward to make good on the above claim.

Wollheim argues that what is special about possession of an individual style is that it is realized in the psychology of the possessor.¹² This is the last major point of common ground for theorists of style. It is not difficult to see why. What, other than something in an individual's psychology, could ground any thick sense of style being their own? Theorists diverge over the details of how an individual style is psychologically realized. Wollheim describes a tripartite model of realization involving a schema, a collection of style rules, and a set of style dispositions.

A style schema is one's formal representation of the activity. Wollheim describes it as a framework that organizes the activity into categories.¹³ A schema for a sport would psychologically represent the fundamental elements of that sport. However, schemas do not always have to do so in the same way. For instance, one basketball player may conceive of a field goal and a free throw as one element of basketball, while another may think of them as two.

10. Borges (1941).

11. Danto (1991, p. 208). Carroll (1995) argues that Danto's views on style in this respect are consistent with his larger aesthetics, but some of what he says about style elsewhere is inconsistent.

12. Wollheim (1987, p. 189-191) refers to this as the *psychological reality* of individual style.

13. Wollheim (1987, p. 191-2).

An agent operates with the categories given by the schema in accordance with a set of style rules that provide cognitive behavioral guidance.¹⁴ The guidance provided can range from simple to quite complex, and second-order rules may be necessary to resolve conflicts. However, the rules themselves are abstract. They are translated into activity by the third part of the model—style dispositions.¹⁵ It is the style dispositions that really do the heavy lifting of psychological realization.

§ II TWO VIEWS OF STYLISTIC EXPRESSION

The two major theories of individual style are both elaborations of Wollheim's basic picture. That picture, as proponents of those theories see it, is not so much wrong as too vague. It is fairly permissive about which schema, rules, and dispositions are appropriate grounds for style. Whatever restrictions there are come about as consequences of which combinations of these can actually be realized in an individual's psychology. However, because an individual style holds out the promise of insights into its possessor, one could think that not just any psychologically possible combination should count. Likely, some schema, rules, and dispositions would not provide insights like those characteristically expected of style. If that is right, then we need to add a condition that psychological realization expresses something specific about the individual. The disagreement between the two theories is about what must be expressed.

The Personality View

The guiding thought of the Personality Theory of Style is encapsulated in Buffon's well-known remark that "style is the man himself."¹⁶ According to the Personality Theory, what an individual style expresses is a personality. The natural first thought is that this should be the personality of the individual the style belongs to:

(P): Individual style expresses the personality of its possessor

Perhaps P resonates with the experiences of some artists. In *What Is Art?*, Leo Tolstoy claims that successful art conveys what the artist experienced during the process of creation to the experiencer of that art.¹⁷ That would presumably include a sense of the artist's personality since that personality would influence the experience of creation. Nonetheless, Jenifer Robinson, who has been the most prominent defender of the Personality Theory, has raised a fatal objection against P.¹⁸

14. Wollheim (1987, p. 192-3).

15. Wollheim (1987, p. 193-4).

16. Buffon (1924, p. 286).

17. Tolstoy (1979, p. 36).

Robinson observes that the personality visible in an artist's style is frequently opposed to the personality displayed outside of it.¹⁹ She illustrates this with the example of Tolstoy.²⁰ Tolstoy was allegedly a quarrelsome man in his personal life.²¹ Nonetheless, *Anna Karenina* and *War & Peace* appear to be written by a compassionate and patient person. The simple personality view then has to say that *Anna Karenina* is not written in Tolstoy's individual style because his real personality is not expressed by it. Of course, it is not plausible that *Anna Karenina* is not in Tolstoy's style. So, Robinson proposes an amended version of the Personality Theory:²²

(IP): Individual style expresses the implied personality of its possessor

As the name suggests, an implied personality is the personality that appears to be expressed, whether it is that individual's real personality. Robert Hopkins & Nick Riggle have argued that the move from P to IP gives up the claim to psychological reality because the implied personality may not be realized in the individual's psychology in any robust sense.²³

While this point does press on whether IP speaks to the motivation for an expression condition, I disagree that IP undermines the psychological reality of individual style. It's right that a merely implied personality doesn't exist in the individual's psychology in the robust way that their actual personality does. But the requirement is only that the style be psychologically realized. The personality it appears to express does not have to also be so long as the schema, rules, and dispositions that together do the expressing are.

There are other problems with IP. It is questionable whether every stylistic quality is a quality of a possible personality. Some styles do not obviously imply anything about the personality of their possessor. I sometimes find this to be the case with purely instrumental music. Mozart's compositions surely exhibit his individual style, but I would be unable to articulate much of an implied personality on their basis.

Hopkins & Riggle also raise what I take as the most conclusive objection. They point out that IP is poorly suited to explaining any limitations on which styles are possible. IP only explains limitations imposed by an activity or an artistic medium when they have to do with which personalities it is capable of expressing. Although it

18. Robinson (1985). Robinson defends her view largely in the context of literature but endorses the claim that it generalizes to other domains of style.

19. Robinson (1985, p. 233-37).

20. I have not seen anyone point out the irony of this.

21. Nothing turns on whether this is actually true since there are numerous other examples we might appeal to.

22. *ibid.*

23. Hopkins & Riggle (2021, p. 2-3).

does not strictly entail it, *IP* might naturally also seem to suggest that any mediums or activities that are capable of expressing the same implied personality can be done in the same style.²⁴ So, if such limitations exist, then *IP* does not tell us about why they do or how they work.

I agree with Hopkins & Riggle that there are limitations on style like this. It seems possible to express an implied personality in mediums that are incapable of expressing the corresponding individual style. As they note, a narrative painting can't really live up to the style of Henry James. I think the implausibility worsens the wider we vary the substrates. It is possible for a tennis player to imply through play an angry, neurotic, and maladjusted personality. It seems wildly unlikely that tennis could be played in the style of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*.²⁵

The Ideals View

Robert Hopkins and Nick Riggle propose an alternative to the Personality Theory of Style—the Ideals Theory:²⁶

I: Individual style expresses the ideals of its possessor

According to Hopkins and Riggle, ideals are action-guiding conceptions of excellence with which one identifies.²⁷ Though people generally endorse a range of ideals, only those in the particular domain of a style are relevant to it. So, for instance, one's artistic style expresses only one's artistic ideals.

Are ideals plausible grounds for individual style? That they are capable of the necessary psychological realization might seem to be ensured by one necessarily endorsing one's ideals. However, it is worth pointing out that endorsement alone is probably not sufficient for psychological reality. Someone could endorse ideals but fail in general to be guided by those ideals. That is familiar as a case of weakness of will. The ideal could fail to be action-guiding because it is straightforwardly difficult to live up to or because other factors inhibit the translation of ideal into action. One could consciously strive, for instance, to embody an ideal of impartiality but still inadvertently be partial in their treatment of friends.

To have psychological reality, the ideals do actually need to be realized in dispositions that are typically action-guiding. Nonetheless, I don't see any reason to suppose ideals couldn't be psychologically realized in that way. I am more skeptical

24. Hopkins & Riggle (2021, p. 10).

25. I refer here to the personal style of the character and not to the literary style of *Notes from Underground*.

26. Hopkins & Riggle (2021, p. 3).

27. Riggle (2017) has argued independently that ideals are analogous to metaphors. He has also argued that the specific ideal of aesthetic appreciation should be to develop a style (Riggle 2015a). Both of the papers suggest important implications for the character of ideals, such as that ideals are normative and indefinite, which undoubtedly will have consequences regarding the substantive implications of the Ideals Theory. Unfortunately, reasons of space prevent exploring these consequences.

that we should think of style as necessarily expressing a conception of excellence. I can give what I hope will be a compelling personal example. I am a relatively decent chess player. I have played chess since I was a child, and, for several years, I took lessons and regularly competed in tournaments. Plausibly, I have developed enough conception of chess as an activity and of what that activity is about to have an individual style of play.

In fact, I do think I have a style in which I play chess—but I do not think that style matches my ideals of chess playing. Putting it plainly, when I play a serious game of chess, the only ideal I really endorse is winning as decisively as possible.²⁸ In such games, winning is always what I am trying to do, and, if I were to try to improve my chess playing, what I would do is try to improve my ability to win, whatever that ended up looking like. I have also played enough chess to recognize that there are characteristic ways in which I fail to live up to this ideal. I have a fairly aggressive style of play, in the sense that I am often quick to trade pieces, tend to move my queen and rooks into precarious positions near the centers of action, and attempt to set ambitious traps for my opponent.

These tendencies are grounded in some stable elements of my psychology—I enjoy making moves I see as bold or interesting and sometimes lose patience with the process of determining whether it really is a good move and decide to just see what happens. Since I am not indifferent or unthinking regarding these choices and their outcomes, I think it is fair to say they genuinely are part of my individual style of playing chess. Regardless, I am also aware that this style of play often conflicts with my ability to win. I accept trades that later put me at a disadvantage, lose pieces because I moved them into danger, and have traps I set backfire. I see these facts as speaking decisively against my tendencies, so my style of play conflicts with my ideal.

This example also brings out a separate but related point. I doubt that someone must endorse their own individual style. I do not endorse some elements of how I play chess. I am no longer invested enough in playing seriously to feel strongly about that, but I can imagine someone who dislikes or even resents their individual style. This could occur in a situation like mine, where the person remains deeply invested in the activity, or it could occur when someone, after long experience with one set of ideals, changes to another.

Consider a pianist who received a rigorous education in classical performance, during which the pianist personally endorsed the ideals that guided that traditional education, achieving both the relevant technical mastery and the capacity to work in

28. By “serious,” I preclude the sort of game I now play most often, which are games with someone who is much less experienced, who I am trying to help improve, or in which there is some additional context outside of the game that I prioritize, such as the other player having a good time.

an individual style guided by these orthodox ideals. After many years of play, the pianist then begins to lose confidence in those ideals. They start to seem narrow, pretentious, and hollow. Nonetheless, years of training and habituation have hardened the psychological hold of the original ideals such that it is impossible to put this skepticism into practice. The endorsement of new ideals ends up amounting to nothing in terms of motivating dispositions.

According to I, a case like the above should be impossible. Once the pianist gives up the traditional ideals, they are no longer in possession of their old style—even if they continue playing piano exactly as they had before and their piano playing is underwritten by the same psychological schema, rules, and dispositions. But that does not feel like the right answer, precisely because nothing about their way of playing piano has changed. It would likewise feel wrong to say that they have a new style, one governed by the new ideals, because those ideals have nothing to do with how they actually play. Moreover, we don't even need to reject our style's value to want to change it. There are musicians with a seemingly endless drive towards reinvention—Neil Young, Taylor Swift, and Sturgill Simpson come to mind.

Another concern is I's consequences for accidental or unintentional style. It is possible that someone could luck into the possession of an individual style without ever having intended to develop one.²⁹ Defenders of I might respond that, although this person did not intend to develop a style, they did intend to express their relevant ideals. They just happen to get style for free as a result. We can push the issue, though. What about cases where the acquisition and expression of ideals is also accidental, i.e., where what is being expressed is something at least partly unconscious? We regularly attribute to people hidden motivations; we are especially inclined to do so in criticism, even if we are not of an overly psychoanalytic bent. These unconscious attitudes could largely resemble ideals, so they could shape apparently stylistic activity in much the same way. If we accept that when ideals do so, it counts as style, then why shouldn't we also accept this for analogous unconscious attitudes?

Since Hopkins & Riggle allow for ideals to crystallize or change shape over time, they might reply that ideals do not need to be known from the outset. Instead, one's ideals might only become concrete as the relevant project or activity progresses. The trouble is that this makes the possession of individual style contingent on its psychological grounds eventually becoming conscious as ideals, which simply relocates the original issue. Suppose that the unconscious attitudes never complete the transformation into ideals. I am not any less inclined to attribute style on their basis. Moreover, it would only be sensible to require full awareness of ideals if we thought

29. Danto (1991, p. 208) objects to complete intentionalism about style on this basis. He describes style as a history of often unconscious artistic development. Cf. Carroll (1995, p. 253-4) for a discussion regarding the example of Charlie Chaplin.

that their eventual articulation conferred style backward on the activities involved in the ideals' formation. Conceiving of individual style as future-contingent in this way, however, alienates it from what actually exhibits that style in the present. It also implausibly requires us to hold off judgments about individual style until we can be sure the subject of those judgments is sufficiently self-aware.

An Alternative Approach

To find an alternative to these theories, I want to follow a hunch that expression is not really the heart of style. I agree with Robinson, Hopkins, and Riggle that individual style can be—and frequently is—expressive of revealing facts about a person. My concern is that too much attention to that fact may have led philosophers to develop accounts of style in the wrong direction. I find it helpful to frame this concern around what Kendall Walton calls the *Cobbler Model*.³⁰ In the Cobbler Model, the object of style exists apart from producing or creating that object. The Cobbler Model, Walton argues, distorts our understanding because it emphasizes one perspective of aesthetic appreciation over other relevant perspectives. In arts like theater or dance, the activity of creation is itself a powerful aesthetic experience.³¹

Robinson, Hopkins, and Riggle are not really adherents of the Cobbler Model. Personality and ideals must be expressed by the activity of the dispositions that realize individual style. Although we often infer the content of those dispositions from the properties of finished products, that really matters only insofar as it affects what has actually been expressed. Nonetheless, it seems to me that their emphasis on expression may invite an analogous mistake.

If we see expressive meaning as the interesting part of style—as both theories invite us to—then it is an easy step to seeing expressive meaning as like style's product. Because that product is public, the emphasis is placed on appreciation of style from the perspective of a spectator. But that is not the only perspective on style there is.

In a relevant passage, Nietzsche describes the privileging of the spectator as a widespread philosophical error:

I wish only to underscore that Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem starting from the experiences of the artist (the one who creates), thought about art and the beautiful from the viewpoint of the “spectator” and thus, without it being noticed, got the “spectator” himself into the concept “beautiful.”³²

30. Walton (1987, p. 74-81).

31. See also Nguyen (2020a) for similar points in the context of process vs. object art.

32. Nietzsche, GM III: 6.

I want to remain ambivalent about how broadly right Nietzsche is. Here, I want only to say that overemphasis on expressive meaning, to the extent that it leads us to theorize style only from the perspective of spectators, leaves something out. The Agential Theory of Style is my attempt to follow through on his suggestion to think about aesthetic problems from the perspective of the one who creates.

§ III THE AGENTIAL THEORY OF STYLE

To talk substantively about individual style from the perspective of the “creator,” we need to talk about agency. The agential capacities of the creator and their exercise are what guide the activity of creation. Moreover, because of the demanding requirements possessing an individual style involves, there should be something distinctive that realizes it in the agency of someone with an individual style.

Of course, this is just what Wollheim tried to describe with his tripartite model. I would not object if anyone preferred to see the Agential Theory as a reworking of that model rather than an entirely new theory. The same could be said of both the Personality and Ideals Theories. Robinson, Hopkins, Riggle, and I are in agreement that Wollheim is largely right, though in need of supplementation.

Our difference is that I think what needs to be supplemented is the account of the relationship between psychological realization and activity. Unfortunately, Wollheim’s model is wanting in that respect. The entire burden of connecting individual style to activity is placed on the style dispositions, and the specifics of how they behave are left open. Consequently, the Agential Theory aims to provide those specifics.

Style in the Structure of Agency

We might first think that these specifics can be given in terms of ordinary means and ends. Since the instrumental side of practical agency might appear most suited to capturing the adverbial emphasis of style, let us first see whether individual style could be realized in just the instrumental means the agent takes.

If style is to be realized only instrumentally, the means in question cannot be means to any specifically stylistic aims. In line with what I said in §1, they then have to be the means to ends given by the activity itself. Ends are “given” in this sense if the agent does not count as engaging in the activity without adopting them. Consequently, they are minimal, i.e., just the bare requirements to count as participating, either as direct requirements of participation—scoring goals in soccer—or as prerequisites to participation—picking paper to draw on.

At least for human agents, they will also be “given” to the agent by a psychological representation. That representation provides a context in which the activity and its elements are comprehensible as such to the agent. The role is analogous to that

of Wollheim's schema. However, the bare representation of the activity will not do any organizing that represents a stylistic decision. In general, there is likely to be some room for variation. But variations that stray too far from the public character of the activity may cease to be representations of that activity. They become representations of some other activity, which shifts the context in which individual style is exhibited.

Now, a given style clearly rules out some actions, recommends others, leaves some choices open, etc... That is what Wollheim meant to capture with style rules. Here, they will specifically be rules that govern which means are taken in pursuit of the generic ends of the activity. The style dispositions, then, become dispositions to take means in accordance with these rules.

That is as far, I think, as a purely instrumental model can take us. It is not far enough. First, means don't adequately individuate styles. On the one hand, two agents that employ the same means do not necessarily possess the same style. This could be because one or both lack a style at all. A beginning violinist undeniably takes some means to ends of violin playing but is unlikely to already have an individual violin style. It could also be that while both have a style, this particular choice of means is only stylistic for one of them. Choice of paper may be stylistic for one illustrator and not for another.

On the other hand, two agents may take different means but still have identical individual styles. Suppose that the choice of paper is not stylistic for either illustrator. So long as the elements that do contribute to their individual styles are the same, then it's hard to deny that both possess the same style. Identical means might also contribute to different styles because of different historical contexts, as we saw with Pierre Menard.

A second problem is that individual styles typically provide ends beyond the bare ones given by the activity itself. A common further end for an individual style is excellence. Individual style is an achievement on the part of its possessor, so, unsurprisingly, many styles aim not just at doing something, but at doing it well. Maybe stylistic constraints of this sort can be represented as dispositions only to choose means that lead to the more specific aims.

So, the master carpenter aims just to make a chair but takes only means that lead to an excellent chair. It isn't very plausible that this is the right description of the carpenter's agency. For one thing, carpenters will not always be in a position to know which means will lead to excellence.³³ Second, if excellence is not providing guidance as an end, then we are forced to treat the disposition to choose only excellent means as brute. The means aren't chosen because they are excellent; the means the carpenter is disposed to choose just happen to be excellent.

33. Though perhaps this was untrue for one well-known, allegedly divine carpenter.

However, brute dispositions will have trouble explaining why individual styles characteristically exhibit unity or are often perceived as a gestalt. Individual styles are not usually random collections of elements. They stand together as a way of doing an activity so that the style as a whole makes intelligible the individual elements as members of it. However, endorsing one instrumental means results only in very narrow consistency constraints on what other means one could take. All that must be avoided are means that directly conflict with the endorsed one, and only in that particular case. There is no requirement that one's means have any kind of mutual cohesiveness, which could explain style's unity, and brute dispositions do nothing to provide one.

Suppose instead that we tried to describe individual style just with respect to ends. Then, differences in individual style would mirror differences in the relevant ends of agents. We've just seen that this is sometimes true. Nonetheless, differences in ends do not seem to track differences in style much better. Just sharing high-level ends cannot be sufficient for sharing an individual style because taking different means to those ends can drastically alter the character of the activity.

Individual styles do not only provide further ends. An individual style may also involve conceiving of those ends in a particular way. Acquiring an individual style often involves acquiring a distinctive psychological representation of the activity, moving away from the neutral representation described above. Adapting an example from Nelson Goodman, consider two biographers of the same individual.³⁴ One biographer frames their narrative of the subject's life around their personal relationships, the other around their public career.

Even if both biographies overlap in the events they describe, we can imagine the difference in emphasis amounting to a stylistic difference. We could further imagine this as an explicit decision by each author to do justice to one aspect of the subject's life. But we can also imagine that no decision like that was made. Both could just conceive of their task as to provide a true account of a life and an explanation of why it went that way. The differences then reflect a different representation of the task of biography in terms of what is more explanatory of the person, analogous to the difference between a historian who conceives of history as driven by individuals and a historian who sees it as driven by collective forces.

Moreover, ends do not on their own seem to provide enough guidance for an individual style. Imagine you are the reader of an early manuscript of *King Lear*. You know

34. Goodman (1975, p.801).

Shakespeare is stylistically committed to the pursuit of honesty.³⁵ Indeed, you recognize it here: When Lear demands avowals of devotion from his daughters, Cordelia is the only one to qualify her love. She is also the only one to really love him.

The details of what this reveals about love for human beings, however, are left implicit. You interpret it as suggesting love that can be lived without deception depends on the recognition of boundaries—limits on what love can demand are part of what give its demands significance, and a loving relationship that refuses to own up to its boundaries will be unstable. Suppose you suggest to Shakespeare that he have Cordelia make this point explicitly. That is probably better, from the point of view of attaining his end, since the audience will be more likely to grasp the message.

Nonetheless, we can easily imagine Shakespeare objecting. The problem isn't that this would necessarily turn out poorly. Exposition is not always the mark of a hack. Melville devotes one of the best chapters of *Moby Dick* to an explanation of the symbolic importance of the whale's white color.³⁶ The objection is stylistic. That isn't how *Shakespeare* wants to be honest, and the issue is that we don't have any resource presently to explain what guides Shakespeare to take a stand against this particular manifestation of honesty.

Worse, taking a stand on matters like this feels like a major part of what an individual style does. While it is true that most of the time, a given individual style will not determine only a single, unique action as suitable, it is also true that an individual style must take some fairly definite stand on how even an abstract end is to be promoted in a particular activity. If it didn't, then individual styles would frequently fail to be distinctive or to be unified by their consistency. But both are typical properties of individual style.

So, neither means nor ends alone can describe the realization of individual style in agency. Appealing to both, however, might allow us to articulate a structured hierarchy that overcomes these problems. A hierarchy of stylistic ends, the levels of which instrumentally relate more general ends to more contextually specific ones and only in stylistically acceptable ways, could be hoped to provide a satisfactorily concrete level of agential guidance.

I want to argue that model is still inadequate because it still fails to capture the core sense in which style is adverbial. Though the instrumental relationships between levels in the hierarchy tell us something about *how* the agent does things, they do not really tell us about the agent's "way of doing." I described that way of doing as an exercise of freedom, in the sense that it is how the agent settles what is left up to them.

35. The honesty I am talking about is not the honesty of literal realism. Shakespeare shows no qualms in employing the fantastical, unlikely, or idealized. Rather, it is an honesty that uses the tools of artistry to draw attention to facets of ourselves and others that we often prefer not to look at.

36. Chapter 42, The Whiteness of the Whale.

However, the means-ends model does not give us a way of representing in agency the difference between what is left up to the agent in this way and what is not. We can label ends and means as stylistic based on our external understanding of style, but it would be much better if we could also distinguish them from the internal perspective of agency. Otherwise, that distinction is apt to feel *ad hoc*.

The problem in the case of individual style is that the whole point of psychological reality is to explain the special relationship someone has to their individual style. To do that, we not only need to say in agential terms what is stylistic, but we further need to distinguish possessing an individual style from working in a general one. But on the above model, ends can be endorsed and means taken regardless of one's specific psychological relationship. If we try to address this by talking about what motivates or underwrites them, we give up the ambition of a specifically agential account of style. We are also likely to find ourselves again faced with the problems of the Personality Theory and the Ideals Theory, because personality and ideals are likely to offer many of the most plausible motivational explanations.

So, if means, ends, or a structure of related ends and means doesn't realize individual style, what does? My suggestion is that it is instantiated in a different agential structure. That structure captures the distinction between style, signature, and everything else as well as the special relationship of possession by appealing to agential layering.

Layered Agency as the Structure of Style

In his recent work, C. Thi Nguyen explores the capacity of human agents to adopt layered structures in our agency.³⁷ Drawing on that work, we can flesh out the Agential Theory to avoid the problems discussed in the previous section. A layered agential structure is capable of psychologically realizing individual style because it can model the way an individual style takes a stand on the way an activity is to be done. Possession of an individual style then amounts to one's agency being structured in the appropriately layered way. As the term itself suggests, it is natural to think about that layering spatially. Indeed, that is frequently how Nguyen approaches it. However, I would like to introduce the mechanics of agential layering by way of a different analogy, which I think will better highlight the features we will make use of.

Think of our agency—as we have so far talked about it—on the model of a political community. The body politic is made up of activities, and the community is populated by means and ends. The rational pursuit of the ends through activity is the whole concern of the community. Inhabitants of the community are not equal—a hierarchy of importance and authority exists that reflects the instrumental relationships and the comparative value of final ends. Nonetheless, the community's laws

37. Nguyen (2020b, p. 53-58).

are the norms of agency, and their authority over everyone is absolute. The community is also extremely litigious. Any inhabitant can be accused of making trouble for the communal business at any point. The accusation must be promptly litigated, and any violations of the law must be immediately rectified, on pain of practical irrationality. The result is something like a constitutional oligarchy with a surveillance state.

This general litigiousness starts to interfere with the community's business. The constant need to respond to potential indictments biases the community against inhabitants that can't justify themselves in direct, straightforward ways. But sometimes straightforward approaches don't seem to work very well, so it would be better if the community didn't always favor them.

For instance, a straightforward approach is inappropriate when it isn't known at the outset what the concrete achievement of an ultimate end would consist in or when it is only partially known how to get there. The pursuit of happiness provides an example. It is a familiar, if unfortunate, experience to imagine something as essential to our happiness only to find oneself less than content on attaining it. Many ends involving a significant degree of learning are also like this. A young student aiming one day to become a great philosopher will probably start out with a very indefinite conception of philosophy and little knowledge of what makes it great. Things could easily go awry if they pursue that aim directly, so that the student ends up in a cult or becoming a psychologist. Better to start by finding a more straightforward goal that looks reasonably like a step in the right direction. The ultimate goal can thereby be pursued indirectly while avoiding unnecessary risk.

Our imaginary community responds to this problem by granting some important ends a special aristocratic status. With it comes the prerogative that those in the service of aristocratic ends are to be given some degree of indemnity against the laws of agency. Those laws are still absolute in authority, but conformity to them is now checked periodically, a spontaneous indictment only being possible when there is strong evidence or when the circumstances are such as to warrant special scrutiny, e.g., when their opportunity cost becomes obviously high.

With this Magna Carta-esque reform, the community looks less like a panopticon, but it is still a robust oligarchy. The aristocratic ends are given a new privilege to extend; the ends at the top of the political hierarchy do not transfer independent authority downwards. Whenever there is an indication that their interests are contravened, that legal protection is revoked. However, it soon becomes clear that in some cases the indirect pursuit of an end needs to be directed by a local autonomous authority.

Local autonomy can be necessary when an end is *self-effacing*, i.e., such that the explicit focus on its pursuit undermines the ability to actually attain it.³⁸ Again, a classic example is happiness. Not only could someone fail to know what will make them happy, but referring every decision to the standard of happiness is unlikely to lead to it. The most plausible constituents of happiness, like love, friendship, and meaningful projects, demand that their objects be treated non-instrumentally. You cannot genuinely love someone primarily for the sake of your own happiness.³⁹ Even if you could, the happiness love can deliver depends in practice on treating the beloved as a locus of final value.

In many cases, the latter is the primary issue. Even where there is no logical incompatibility, the indirect promotion of an end could still be difficult or impossible in practice unless the indirect activity is treated as having autonomous authority. Nguyen's favored example of games illustrates this. In general, there probably isn't a logical incompatibility between attending to our reasons for playing a game and playing it, but often the value we can derive from game playing depends on our insulating the activity from other aspects of our agency. We need to invest the rules and actions of the game with significance. Yet, the absolute perspective of our general agency is prone to make salient that the rules are made up and the actions of the game are frequently trivial or even silly. Moreover, it isn't just the self-effacing end itself that may cause interference. We need to see our agency in playing the game as separate from our agency outside it, or we might not be able to disregard our compassion for a losing player, the urge to favor our friends, or become too deeply invested in winning.

So, the community develops a new political institution, which empowers the inhabitants of some political regions of the community (activities) to set up their own government. Within that region, the new local government replaces the wider one. Not only can a different social hierarchy be set up, but also a whole new code of law enacted. The community-wide government monitors the situation in these regions from the outside, influencing the flow of resources to them as well as their interactions with the rest of the community. Because the ultimate justification for this institution is the good of the community, there is a forceful presumption against any interference in the internal affairs of these regions. Nonetheless, the broader government retains the right to revoke autonomy when it comes to clearly and significantly contravening the communal good. When that right is exercised, whether the region continues to exist as a political unit will depend on the context of the offense.

38. See Ferrero (2022a) & Ferrero (2022b) for an overview and discussion of the structure of diachronic agency.

39. Cf. Sidgwick (Book I, Ch. IV, §2) on the Paradox of Hedonism.

These autonomous regions are the analogue of agential layers. The point has been to illuminate the sense in which agential layers are self-contained agential structures. Submerging ourselves in an agential layer in order to play a game is like entering a region of the community granted local autonomy. Agency within that region takes on the character of the so-called “magic circle” of games, where only the rules, ends, and strategies of the game matter. The agent is capable of moving between inner and outer layers by traveling back out of the region, thereby pausing or ending the game. An outer layer of agency retains indirect authority over an inner layer by prompting movement between layers; the wider community can make diplomatic requests to autonomous regions in response to changes in circumstance, e.g., a well-adjusted person will abandon Scrabble if one of their opponents has a heart attack. The outer layer also sets the standards by which the value of the inner layer is to be assessed from the outside. If submersion in an agential layer tends to cause more trouble than it’s worth, then diplomatic relations break down. The region’s autonomous status, i.e., the existence of the layer, is reviewed and possibly revoked—the outer layer of agency ceases to endorse submersion in the inner layer and seeks to dismantle it. If our Scrabble player is tempted to ignore the emergency to continue playing with the other opponents, they may come to think Scrabble is too dangerous for them to play.

Submersion in an agential layer manifests phenomenologically as absorption in the activity of the layer. When we are absorbed in an activity, we pay less attention or do not notice things outside of it. In general, layered agential structures are fluid so that the agent can move both in and out of absorption in a given layer.⁴⁰ The ease of movement between layers is related to what Luca Ferrero calls the *opacity* of the layer. More opacity means more resistance is encountered in moving between layers. Phenomenologically, the opacity of a layer presents as the degree of absorption, i.e., the inertia possessed by the felt lack of concern or awareness.⁴¹

Some opacity is necessary to pull off agential layering. An inner layer with no opacity would be no different from ordinary indirect agency. Still, too much opacity undermines the point of agential layering. The world being what it is, it is always possible that the layer will not function properly. Too much opacity can cause the agent to miss signs of this visible from outside the layer. I was recently repairing a felt shoe and became so absorbed in felting that I failed to notice the hole had gotten bigger.⁴² Therefore, the degree of psychological opacity has to be finely balanced in order for a layered agential structure to have the right level of fluidity. What level of fluidity is right will depend upon the function of the layered structure. In some

40. Nguyen (2020b) discusses fluidity extensively in Ch. 2 and Ch. 3.

41. Ferrero (2021, p. 4-6).

42. Cf. *ibid* for a more detailed discussion of these dynamics.

contexts, it may be important that we be able to oscillate between layers with ease. In others, it may be critical to the point of the layer that it is difficult to step out of.

Drawing on the above, we are now in a position to articulate the Agential Theory of Style in a way that I hope lives up to its motivations:

Agential Theory of Style: Individual style with respect to an activity is realized psychologically by a layered agential structure in which the outer layer instantiates the basic agential requirements of participation in the activity and a nested inner layer instantiates the specific agential requirements of the style.

Realizing Individual Style

By appealing to the Agential Theory, we can now give a detailed account of how Wollheim's schema, rules, and dispositions work to realize style in agency. The agential structure described by the theory has two nested layers. The outer layer corresponds to the activity generally, while the inner layer corresponds to the individual style. The bare agential requirements realized in the outer layer are given by the agent's psychological representation of the activity. That representation needs to be neutral in the same manner and for the same reasons as in our discussion of realizing style instrumentally. However, here the outer layer we are referring to is not necessarily the outermost layer of agency. For instance, in a game that requires submersion in an agential layer to play, the layer reflecting the basic requirements of the activity will itself be nested within general agency.

The development of an inner layer within this outer layer reflects the acquisition of an individual style. So, to possess an individual style is to have a developed inner layer of this sort. The inner layer realizes the stand an individual style takes on the agent's "way of doing" through further requirements on engagement in the activity. The agent's commitment to that style manifests in the opacity of the layer.

Developing an inner layer appropriate for style involves developing a new psychological representation of the activity, corresponding to the style schema, which is now individual to the agent. How different the schema is from the neutral representation may vary. One individual style may involve a very idiosyncratic understanding of the basic organization of an activity, in which case the difference will be great. Another may impose further requirements on activity but with reference to essentially the same organizational representation. I see no problem with the schema even being identical to the neutral representation since it can be a significant fact about an individual style that it does not depart from the mainstream.

The new schema does not replace the previous representation of the activity generally. If it did, then anyone possessed of individual style would consequently see their style as not just the best way of pursuing the activity, but the only possible

way.⁴³ The Agential Theory avoids this by retaining the old representation with respect to agency while in the outer layer. When an agent works in their individual style, they submerge themselves in the inner layer, where the new organizational structure given by the schema is active.

The specifics of the style determine the agential character of this layer. That includes the specification of style-relative ends, which may either be newly stipulated or ends carried over from the outer layer. Ends that are retained may change in their importance relative to other ends, corresponding to the emphasis placed on it by the style. However, the ends of the outer layer do not have to be ends in the inner layer, which represents a style's rejection of their significance or aptness.

The rules of a style may be manifested in the ends of the inner layer. The simplest rules just stipulate ends. Rules that prohibit something might involve stipulating a negative end. Coordinating rules, i.e., rules about what to do in cases where other rules conflict, can be represented in the relative importance of the ends within the inner layer.

Style rules could also characterize the local norms of agency in the inner layer, which impose new instrumental requirements on the pursuit of ends. Some rules could be articulated in either way. A prohibitive rule might stipulate a negative end, or it might be articulated as a norm against certain actions. Whether a style rule is realized as an end in the inner schema or as a norm is likely related to how central it is to the style. This is a plausible consequence of the opacity of the inner layer, which will cause violations of inner norms to simply not present themselves, while submerged, as possibilities in deliberation. They become locally unthinkable, in the sense described by Harry Frankfurt and Bernard Williams.⁴⁴

For the most part, the role of the style dispositions in the agential theory is to enact these rules and norms. As such, they are dispositions of the inner layer, in the sense that they are sensitive to which agential layer is presently active. Most of the dispositions associated with an individual style will then be primed to influence action only while the agent is submerged in the inner layer. Still, there might be at least one special type of style disposition that would belong to the outer layer. What I have in mind are dispositions for the agent to activate the inner layer in certain situations. It seems reasonable that as part of one's commitment to a style, that style may insist upon itself in practice. I take it that there is room for variation with respect to how insistent a given individual style is, but there would be something very odd about a style that didn't at all predispose its possessor to its exercise.

43. This may be sometimes what underlies a certain kind of snobbery—one adopts unnecessary requirements as wide-scope agential constraints on an activity and so becomes unable to see anything that does not meet them as genuinely that activity.

44. Frankfurt (1988, ch. 13) & Williams (1981, ch. 10).

Another aspect of this commitment is that an individual style cannot be changed or abandoned at will, as illustrated by the example of the disillusioned pianist. The Agential Theory explains the stability of style partly by the difficulty of constructing appropriate layers. Our reflections on game playing might have led to the thought that setting up a layer should be easy, but agential layering in games is facilitated by an already articulated set of rules as well as social practices that normalize treating them as authoritative. Despite this, the experience of being unable to “get into” a game is still commonplace. Much less is given at the outset in developing a style. A more apt analogy, then, is designing a game rather than playing one. That analogy also goes some way towards underwriting why individual style presents as an achievement.

Primarily, however, it appeals to the opacity of the inner layer, which provides protection against the authority of the outer layer. Opacity can protect the layer even when the agent is not initially submerged in it. If long habit makes it so that one cannot help but be submerged in that layer during the relevant activity, judgments of outer agency would then tend to lose authority just when they need to exert it in order to effect change on the style.

Indeed, this mechanism fits the disillusioned pianist’s case well. But what about the fact that a technically expert individual can choose not to work in their own style? For example, the country singer Marty Robbins was very adept at impersonating other country musicians for talk show appearances. I think this is usually best understood as a temporary suspension of stylistic commitments, which corresponds to emergence from the inner layer of style. That explanation leaves the individual style of Marty Robbins untouched but temporarily frees him from its constraints.

Of course, the opacity of the inner layer may imply that this should be difficult—at least more difficult than Robbins makes it appear. I think the lack of difficulty should be accounted for in one of two ways. First, the conditions that habitually trigger submergence in an agential layer can be quite fine-grained. Consider an agent who maintains separate agential layers for closely related variations of poker. So, Robbins might not understand the activity of impersonation as overlapping sufficiently with the general activity of playing music to trigger automatic submergence in the stylistic layer. Second, the opacity of a layer might be selective, only restricting fluidity where that might threaten or undermine the layer. While playing a board game, we might find it easier to suspend layered agency in order to go get a snack or answer a text message than if exiting the layer meant ending the game entirely.

Finally, the Agential Theory gives a neat explanation of one more typical feature of style: unity. The elements of a style generally hang together cohesively. But that is what we would expect on the agential theory because there is a limited degree of dissonance that an agential layer can tolerate internally if that layer is to function.

Contradictory or unclear norms can lead to agential paralysis. Ends must be compatible enough that the opacity of the layer is not undermined by frustration intrinsic to their pursuit. It probably helps if they are also related in content. Pursuing highly unrelated ends might require changes in attention that make absorption difficult.

We also generally have an easier time caring about some norms and ends. For instance, some games are bad games because they ask us to care about things that we have difficulty regarding, even within an agential layer, as anything other than pointless or rather dull. When it is easier for us to care, it is easier to engage in agential layering. That, together with the coherence of the layer, suggests why it is that ideals and personality are so frequently involved in individual styles. It is easy to care about our ideals or personality, and both are likely to be fairly unified in content. So, the conciliatory suggestion is that personality and ideals are disproportionately viable guides to acquiring an individual style.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A GENERAL THEORY OF STYLE

I want to conclude now by making good on my promise to expand the Agential Theory to general style, which will also allow us to examine how it treats signature. Recall that a general style characterizes a group or community, such as a society, historical period, or school. A general style may only be recognized retrospectively, or it may be deliberately adopted. Unlike individual style, however, general styles are not psychologically real. Which is to say that general style is not possessed by an individual in the “thick” way an individual style is, not that a general style is entirely unreflected in the psychology of someone acting in it. The latter would be far too strong a claim, since it would make the existence of products of general styles miraculous.

My claim that the Agential Theory can give a unified account of style depends on recognizing that general style and individual style often exist together in what resembles a “style economy.” Sometimes, a general style may just refer to the commonalities among a collection of individual styles. If these are also fully isolated and independent—by which I mean they do not influence the development of each other or, as a collective, the development of future styles—then that style will mainly be of critical or historical interest, and we get theoretical unity for free. In all other cases, general and individual styles influence each other so that they change and come in and out of existence in interconnected ways. In the right circumstances, the style of an individual or individuals can come to define the features of a general style or to drive innovation in a pre-existing one, while a general style may coalesce into an

individual style if the agent internalizes it in a way that makes it their own. Intervening positions are possible. An individual style may not supplant the general style regarding the whole activity but only in some locality of it.

This is a too brief and very abstract description of what is in reality a very messy process, but it does deliver the key insight. There is mutual exchange between the two types of style, which results in a developmental dependence on each other. My suspicion is that the history of this exchange for an activity will be almost the entire history of style with respect to it. The Agential Theory explains how this exchange is possible at the psychological level and thereby completes its unified account.

When a general style is not merely a collective designation for individual styles, then there are or have been agents who employ that style but do not possess it. On the Agential Theory, an agent may fail to possess a style individually in two ways. The agent may not realize the style in an agential layer, or the agent may realize the style in an insufficiently opaque layer. So, a general style may be realized either in the non-layered agency governing an activity or in a relatively transparent agential layer.

It is appropriate that general styles may be realized more broadly than individual styles, given that general style is a much broader category. It includes both the styles of groups, like artistic academies, whose members learn from one another in sustained dialogue, and the styles of historical movements, like the early development of Rock N' Roll in the 1950s, where connections between individuals are much looser. Correspondingly, how a general style manifests in agency will depend on the circumstances of the agent and the particular use that agent makes of it.

To illustrate, the fact that Rock N' Roll could be compared to and differentiated from a related earlier tradition, together with the increased prominence of a mass entertainment culture in the United States, meant that Rock musicians in the 50s would not have understood their way of playing music as the only way. Almost all of them would have learned how to play in a different style. So, the stylistic requirements and values of Rock would be better suited to an agential layer. This doesn't need to involve much of a commitment. As long as that layer allows for a high level of fluidity, it will be easy to play in other styles.

In contrast, if we consider the Delta style of Blues music that preceded early Rock N' Roll, we find it developed by a relatively small network of musicians traveling a performance circuit in the rural American South. Given the isolation of the region, the difficulty of long-distance communication at that time, as well as the oppressive social and economic conditions faced by the musicians, some of these musicians may have understood the general style they and their peers worked in as the way Blues was played in general. This style would be unlikely to be captured in an agential layer

within the activity of playing the Blues. Instead, the style would be reflected in their general agency with respect to Blues playing.

Importantly, it would be a mistake to think this has to reflect a dogmatism in these musicians about their way of playing. More often, it would probably simply be that they don't know of any other way of engaging in the activity. The situation here is fairly analogous to the case where the possible ways of realizing an end are not fully known at the outset. In which case, we should see the style as an indirect way of pursuing the ends of the activity. Then, the specific realizations of the Delta style in non-layered agency are likely to still be insulated to a degree from the rest of agency so as to facilitate this, and some innovation within the general style can be accounted for when the methods of indirect pursuit are reassessed.

The "economic" exchange that drives the history of style occurs when an agent working in a general style comes to meet the unmet conditions. They separate the style from the activity as a whole by realizing it in an agential layer and commit to it by making the agential layer opaque. Individual styles then contribute to the development of general styles by being taught and serving as exemplars for inspiration and imitation.

Our final loose end, signature, lies outside this process. For an individual style, an identifying element of the activity is signature if it is not reflected in the agential standards of the inner layer, i.e., is not as such treated by the schema and rules. Signature can be instrumental to the activity without meeting these requirements. While paper is necessary for drawing, qualities of paper and their value might not feature in the norms and ends of the layer realizing an individual style of drawing. I think we get the right results when we generalize the idea: an identifying element of an activity is signature if actions regarding it are not governed by the agential standards of an individual style (in an opaque inner layer) or a general style (in indirect agency in an outer layer or in a transparent inner layer). The generalization also provides a useful test in cases of general styles where this is difficult to determine because the style is non-layered and adopted for instrumental reasons. That is, would the identifying element be signature if it were an individual style instead?

There is much more that could be said, both about this final proposal and the rest of the paper. Therefore, I'll wrap up by listing some of what I think bears further thought. First, the role of indirect agency in some general styles. Second, a closer survey of how well this expanded theory describes specific cases of general style. Third, a more detailed comparison with the developmental history of styles than I have been able to provide. In particular, it would be good to understand the place of styles that range over many activities in such narratives. Fourth, and I think most important, does the Agential Theory help us to understand the importance or value of style?

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