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## Merleau-Ponty and the Significance of Style Andrew Inkpin

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**Abstract:** A distinctive feature of Merleau-Ponty's thought is the central role he assigns style in generally characterizing embodied agents' perceptual and cognitive functioning. Despite this, he says little to explain how he conceives style itself. This article therefore aims to clarify Merleau-Ponty's notion of style and its significance within and beyond his work. It begins by surveying his broad application of the term and using his discussions of painting to reconstruct his conception of style, identifying two major roles Merleau-Ponty attributes it in unifying intentional structures and founding conceptual meaning. His view is related to several competing philosophical conceptions of style to highlight its distinctiveness and some conceptual difficulties in adequately defining style. I then argue that Merleau-Ponty succeeds in coherently distinguishing style from rules by recognizing that style conceives pattern formation, especially the relation of general and particular, in a way contrasting with the identity-based thinking inherent in the functioning of rules. With this distinction I conclude that, although Merleau-Ponty overgeneralizes its role, his conception of style has broader philosophical significance in accurately capturing the nonmechanical cohesion of certain embodied intelligent activities (such as painting) and enabling better understanding of the variety of forms such activities can take.

### 1. Introduction

One distinctive feature of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is the great importance it assigns to style, not only in aesthetics, but in generally characterizing the perceptual and cognitive functioning of embodied agents. Despite this, Merleau-Ponty provides no sustained discussion of how he understands style itself, instead offering only somewhat enigmatic hints, so that it remains difficult to understand its intended philosophical import. This article therefore aims to clarify Merleau-Ponty's notion of style and its significance both within and beyond his work. It begins by surveying the broad range of features Merleau-Ponty characterizes in terms of style and highlighting – as one major role – the basic function he assigns it in defining intentional structures. The third section uses his discussions of painting and indirect sense to shed light on Merleau-Ponty's conception of style and identifies a second major role it plays within his thought as the foundation of conceptual meaning. The fourth relates Merleau-Ponty's view to several competing philosophical conceptions of style to bring out both its distinctiveness and some conceptual difficulties in understanding style adequately. By considering a potential challenge to Merleau-Ponty's conception of style, the fifth section argues that what makes this of philosophical interest is that it conceives pattern formation, especially the relation of general and particular, in a way contrasting with the

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identity-based thinking inherent in the functioning of rules. The final section considers the broader philosophical significance of Merleau-Ponty's notion of style, arguing that, although Merleau-Ponty overgeneralizes its role, this accurately captures the nonmechanical cohesion of some forms of embodied intelligent action and enables better understanding of the variety of forms such action can take.

## 2. Merleau-Ponty's application of the notion of style

Merleau-Ponty employs the notion of style in a wide range of contexts, often in strategically important passages presenting his own views. His reliance on the term 'style' – from *Phenomenology of Perception* onward – coincides with the influence of Husserl's *Ideas II* and he applies it to similar objects/contexts as Husserl.<sup>1</sup> Although most salient in earlier works, it continues to feature in late works such as *The Visible and the Invisible* and *The Eye and the Mind*. To understand the philosophical significance Merleau-Ponty assigned to style, it will help to begin by surveying (albeit not exhaustively) his broad application of this notion under three headings.

A first context – perhaps the most surprising – in which Merleau-Ponty talks of style is in characterizing perceptible features of the (natural) environment. Starting with perceptual constants, seeing colours is described as 'acquiring a certain style of vision' while 'tactile sensations' are linked with 'a certain style of gestures' or a 'certain style of movements' of the hand (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 179, 175 f.; similarly p. 364). At a higher level of structure, 'my phenomena solidify into a thing [*chose*] and [...] and observe a certain constant style as they unfold': 'The perceived thing [...] is an open totality on the horizon of an indefinite number of perspective views that match up according to a certain style, a style that defines the object concerned' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 465; 1996a, p. 49). Similarly, as an indeterminate horizon of all experience, Merleau-Ponty often characterizes the 'world' in terms of style: the 'world itself' is the 'universal style of every possible perception', it is an 'unfinished work' or 'open unity' in which phenomena exhibit 'a certain constant style'; the 'natural world' is 'the style of all styles' (Merleau-Ponty, 1996a, p. 50; 1945, pp. 465, 381; similarly p. 514). Finally, the central notion of his later ontology 'flesh' is still characterized as 'a sort of incarnate principle' that introduces 'a style of being' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 182).<sup>2</sup>

A second context in which Merleau-Ponty relies on style is in characterizing what human bodies do. Here he suggests that 'even reflexes' have the 'style of each individual', that in touching something my hands find 'a certain style that is part of their motoric possibilities', and that habitual skills involve a 'certain style of motoric response' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 100, 365, 169). Likewise, with patterns of behaviour: a 'traumatic experience' persists as 'a style of being and in a certain degree of generality'; 'categorical activity' is 'a style or a configuration of experience' that precedes knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 98, 222). In sum, 'all my actions and my thoughts' relate to my 'existence' as 'a manner of existing, a style' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 519). Further, what applies to me also applies to the visible behaviour of others: 'each other' body or person 'exists for me as a style [*à titre de style*]' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 418; cf. 1964a, p. 186).

A third context in which Merleau-Ponty invokes style is in relation to cultural entities or artefacts. Perhaps his least surprising application of the term is to artworks such as

paintings (see section 3) or literature: a ‘story’ recounts ‘a human event, recognizable by its style’, a novel is the ‘operation of a style’ or ‘inauguration of a style’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 154; 1959, p. 96; 1969, p. 125). Yet he applies the term equally to less usual cases including the ‘total being’ of a city such as Paris, philosophical texts, and schools of thought such as phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 325 (similarly 32, 378); 209, 515; and ii). Most revealingly, Merleau-Ponty frequently invokes style in describing the basic operations of language: ‘speech or words bear a first layer of meaning [*signification*] [...] that yields thought as a style [...] rather than as a conceptual statement’; the ‘generality’ of words ‘is not that of the idea but that of a style of behaviour’ that the body grasps; the ‘sense [*sens*]’ of a word is ‘like a behaviour of the world, a certain inflection of its style, and the generality of sense [...] is not the generality of the concept, but that of the world in its typicality [*monde comme typique*]’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 212, 461, 462).

One might wonder: Does this really matter? Apart from perhaps signalling his esteem for Husserl, does Merleau-Ponty’s use of the term ‘style’ do any philosophical work? To see that it does, the first step is to recognize its important role in opposing ‘objective thought’, particularly in the guise of ‘intellectualism’. According to the ‘intellectualist’, perceived objects are constituted through ‘synthesis’ by a transcendental or absolute subject, as an idealized, complete summation of perspectival presentations of that object.<sup>3</sup> On this view, as Merleau-Ponty explains, the object is ‘seen from all sides’ as a ‘finished object [...] it is penetrated from all sides by an actual infinity of looks that intersect in its depth and leave nothing hidden’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 83). Merleau-Ponty rejects this view of objects as the ‘positing’ of a ‘completed, explicit totality’ because it is an idealization that goes beyond actual lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 85).<sup>4</sup> However, this leaves him needing a new account of a perceived (or intentional) object’s unity, because this can no longer be conceived via the ideal of complete presence, understood as the summation of an infinite series of perspectival presentations. Hence the role of style. On Merleau-Ponty’s own view, cited above, the ‘perceived thing [...] is an open totality on the horizon of an indefinite number of perspective views that match up according to a certain style, a style that defines the object concerned’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1996a, p. 49). In other words, having replaced idealized ‘closure’ with an ‘open totality’ of perspective views, Merleau-Ponty appeals to consistency in its mode of presentation to define the perceived object’s unity. It is in this sense – as constituting its unity – that style delimits or ‘defines the object in question’.<sup>5</sup>

This claim is particularly important because for Merleau-Ponty perception is a model for intentional structures in general.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the function of style with perceived objects generalizes, so that style assumes a major role in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical thinking by identifying the kind of cohesion that constitutes all intentional structures found in ‘open’ horizons.<sup>7</sup> This provides part of the story about the significance of style within Merleau-Ponty’s thought. His broad application of the term ‘style’ is explained by his conviction that style is the unifying and defining basis of all structural features in the phenomenal field.

Nonetheless, the story is so far not very informative. Despite making clear that ‘style’ plays a distinctive role in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, it does not clarify *what* this term is saying about the constitution of intentional structures. In particular, one may wonder whether Merleau-Ponty needs the term ‘style’ or merely uses it – as a stylistic preference, so to speak

– as a synonym for something’s way or manner of being. In this regard two clues can be elicited from the above discussion. First, part of Merleau-Ponty’s point in describing the unity of intentional structures as ‘open’ or ‘unfinished’ is that they cannot be captured or summed up by a formula or rule.<sup>8</sup> Second, his characterizations of language suggest that style involves some kind of preconceptual sense and generality. However, to appreciate the implications of these clues more fully, I now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of style itself.

### 3. Merleau-Ponty’s conception of style

Unpacking Merleau-Ponty’s conception of style is complicated by the fact that, despite often relying on it, he says little to explain how he understands the term. Indeed, the following is the only passage in *Phenomenology of Perception* that comes close to defining style:

A style is a certain manner of treating the situations that I identify or that I understand in an individual or with a writer by taking it up for myself through a sort of mimicry [*mimétisme*], even if I am unable to define it, and the definition of which – as correct as it may be – never provides the exact equivalent and is of interest only to those who have already experienced it [AI: the style]. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 378)

This passage makes some interesting claims about our awareness, or the epistemology, of style. First it highlights the possibility of mimetic uptake, such that style addresses our capacity to mirror or imitate other embodied agents. Further, the apprehension of style does not require – indeed is presupposed by – the ability to explicitly describe or define it. These claims might lead one to think that, for Merleau-Ponty, the notion of style cannot be explicitly (or ‘exactly’) defined, and that this explains why he offers so little by way of a definition.<sup>9</sup> This thought no doubt has a certain consistency, and it plausibly accounts for Merleau-Ponty’s reticence in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Nonetheless, if this was all he says to characterize style, Merleau-Ponty’s position would be clearly inadequate philosophically. For although the above passage says something about the epistemology of style, it does nothing to explain what style is or consists in (apart from obscurely referring to ‘a certain manner of treating situations’). This would leave us with no explanation as to why style cannot be exactly defined, but more importantly with little understanding of Merleau-Ponty’s general claims about the constitution of intentional structures (particularly, what kind of unity these have).

Fortunately, further indications of how Merleau-Ponty conceives style are found in his work on expression in the early 1950s, particularly the essay ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silences’ and the longer, posthumously published manuscript *The Prose of the World*. These texts focus on parallels between language and art as forms of creative embodied expression, drawing extensively on both Saussurean linguistics and painting as a model in developing Merleau-Ponty’s conception of ‘indirect’ or ‘lateral’ sense. Although again no ‘definition’ of style is offered, this section will focus on his discussions of painting, as these provide the best illustration and clarification of what Merleau-Ponty means in talking of style.<sup>10</sup>

Merleau-Ponty invokes style to describe developments in modern painting in the early-mid 20th century. While accepting that painting no longer aspires to complete

‘objective’ representation of the world, he also rejects the thought (attributed to André Malraux) that it can be understood in merely subjective terms. Rather than simply flowing from or standing for a painter’s inner psychological states and biographical facts, Merleau-Ponty insists that painting is a specific kind of expressive act with its own context, determinants and freedom (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 79).<sup>11</sup> Thus in painting ‘style’ is precisely not the ‘man himself’ – as Buffon’s famous dictum has it – but refers to formal features of works. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, it is the imposition of form or patterning (*la mise en forme*; Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 68; 1969, p. 85) or a ‘mode of formulation’, and it is in this sense that ‘What the painter puts into the painting [*tableau*] [...], is his *style*’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, pp. 67, 65).

In making these claims Merleau-Ponty follows standard art-historical practice by using the term ‘style’ to refer to the arrangement or patterning of painted forms. To identify some of the further, more distinctive nuances of his view, I will highlight and explain several expressions Merleau-Ponty uses to circumscribe style. To begin with, in expanding on his claim that artists are the inventors or inaugurators of a style, Merleau-Ponty offers the following characterization:

Style is with each painter the system of equivalences [*système d’équivalences*] that he constitutes for this work of showing [*manifestation*], the universal index of the ‘coherent deformation’ through which he concentrates the sense that is still scattered in his perception and makes it exist explicitly. (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 68)

The two expressions ‘system of equivalences’ and ‘coherent deformation’ are particularly significant. The first had been used (only) three times in *Phenomenology of Perception* (pp. 165, 216, 271) to characterize the body schema’s functioning, suggesting a close link between style and embodiment that emerges explicitly when Merleau-Ponty later traces painted style back to ‘a general power of motoric formulation’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 82). This terminological resonance suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of style in painting can be read as filling out the analogy between the human body and works of art proposed in *Phenomenology of Perception* (pp. 174-177). There Merleau-Ponty highlights several features of this analogy: works of art embody an arrangement of formal elements that are inseparable from a material support; they have organic unity (‘every change’ would modify ‘novelistic sense’) and are individuals. Most importantly, and most enigmatically, Merleau-Ponty takes this analogy to support his view that our ‘own body teaches us a mode of unity that is not subsumption under a law’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 175): ‘It is in this sense that our body is comparable to the work of art. It is a tangle of living meanings [*noeud de significations vivantes*] and not the law of a certain number of covariant terms’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 177). Against this background, the ‘systems of equivalences’ label can be seen to serve a dual purpose: it not only refers to parallels between artworks and the body, but distinguishes the unity and functioning of both from that of a law-governed system.<sup>12</sup>

The second expression – ‘coherent deformation’ – had been used by Malraux to characterize style and is adopted by Merleau-Ponty. The underlying thought here is that style is found whenever features of the world take on form, or as Merleau-Ponty puts it, whenever ‘figures and grounds’ or ‘a norm and a deviation’ are distinguished (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 68; Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 85). The connection between this term and a ‘system of

equivalences' is illuminated by Merleau-Ponty's description of what distinguishes the work of a particular painter, such as Vermeer:

What makes 'a Vermeer' for us, [...], is that the painting observes the system of equivalences according to which each of its elements, like a hundred needles on a hundred dials, shows the same deviation, it is that it speaks the Vermeer language. (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 76)

Merleau-Ponty is here reiterating that what distinguishes Vermeer's paintings is the way form or marks, ultimately brushstrokes ('elements'), build up recognizable and characteristic patterns. The curious image employed – a hundred dials indicating the same deviation – illustrates the idea of 'coherent deformation', such that, even as they vary from previous norms, the arrangement of the manifold marks/forms exhibits a kind of uniformity or common tendency. It is in this sense that these paintings 'speak the Vermeer language' or, as Merleau-Ponty elsewhere puts it, exhibit 'an essence, a structure, a style, [or] a sense' characteristic of Vermeer (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 100).

Merleau-Ponty's characterization of style as a 'mode of formulation' is subject to an important qualification, signalled by the following passage:

what is given to [a painter] with his style is not a manner, a certain number of procedures or tics that he is able to make an inventory of, [rather] it is a mode of formulation that is just as recognizable for others, just as poorly visible for him as his silhouette or his everyday gestures. (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 66 f.)

This passage again touches on the epistemology of style by hinting that others are better placed to recognize a painter's style. More importantly, it might encourage the thought that in talking of style Merleau-Ponty has in mind the techniques a given painter uses, those resulting in corresponding patterns of marks. This is true insofar as his focus here is on how painters work, by building up formal configurations, rather than their overall way of life. Yet it risks effacing a distinction Merleau-Ponty emphasizes between the 'mode of formulation' associated with style and mere "technique" and the "instrument" (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 96). This distinction is marked by the above passage's reference to a 'certain number of procedures' that can be inventoried and forms part of Merleau-Ponty's general rejection of 'direct' sense, understood as the use of signs in regular, repetitive, and supposedly literal ways.<sup>13</sup> The operative thought here is that 'techniques' are something defined by rules that can be mechanically learned and applied, and that this falls short of the spontaneity required by style to generate forms in a distinctive, deviant or 'coherently deformed' way. In this respect Merleau-Ponty's conception of style (perhaps intentionally) echoes Goethe's distinction of 'style' from mere 'manner', and Kant's distinction between genius and artistic skills that can be learned (imitation).<sup>14</sup>

Although fundamentally concerned with form, style is for Merleau-Ponty not *merely* a matter of form. Rather, he conceives style as something intermediate between meaningless form and fully developed intellectual meaning. This intermediate status is reflected in his description of Vermeer's style as 'language' or 'sense' [*sens*]. It also underlies Merleau-Ponty's use of painterly style in characterizing 'indirect sense' and his descriptions of the basic operations of language in terms of style (section 2). In this respect style – together with

Saussurean linguistics – is central to Merleau-Ponty's attempt to ground intellectual capacities (e.g. concept use) in 'prepredicative' lived experience. Hence, in addition to unifying intentional structures, the notion of style has a second major role in Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thinking as the foundation of conceptual meaning. As he puts it, 'style is what makes possible all meaning [*signification*]' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 81). In this respect, it is also important that the notion of style provides a way of conceiving generality and general forms that reflects Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concerns about the traditional notion of essences.<sup>15</sup> While essences are traditionally thought of as universal and unconditioned – features Merleau-Ponty rejects – style has no such connotations. Accordingly, it allows Merleau-Ponty to talk of 'structure' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 172), a 'general manner of talking about being' or 'typical manifestations' (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 70) and suchlike in a way consistent with his identification of the factually conditioned 'phenomenal field' – rather than an idealized transcendental field – as the locus of phenomenological investigations (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 64-77). This unorthodox linking of style with meaning and generality is epitomized by one passage that describes 'style as a preconceptual generality' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 63n) – again echoing his comments about the basic operations of language.

As we might expect, Merleau-Ponty's conception of style is exemplified and powerfully supported by the example of painting. Different painters and different periods clearly have formal features that give them a distinctive look, a fact well captured by Merleau-Ponty's talk of 'systems of equivalence', 'coherent deformation' or a specific 'mode of formulation'. It is also plausible to see stylistic features of paintings as traces of embodied movements and action, and hence as shaped by the body as a 'general power of motoric formulation'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the closer one looks, the clearer this becomes. In Gombrich's (1960, p. 309) words, it 'is in the microstructure of movement and shapes that the connoisseur will find the inimitable personal accent of an artist'. It is here – in the fine-grained detail of a painting's surface – that we can see how individual marks/brushstrokes are built up into potentially meaningful configurations that can be 'seen as' or as standing for something. Conversely, below a certain level of resolution such marks cannot be thought of as independently meaningful. This allows the plausibility of Merleau-Ponty's characterization of style's intermediate intelligibility (as a 'preconceptual generality') to be appreciated: the fine-grained marks are usually applied in a recognizably distinctive way while contributing to a painting's visible and conceptualizable meaning, but cannot in isolation be read as representationally significant.

This section began by observing that *Phenomenology of Perception*'s failure to define style renders obscure Merleau-Ponty's claims about its general role in unifying intentional structures. His later discussions of painting show that Merleau-Ponty's conception of style follows standard use in centring on the arrangement or patterning of form. Its more distinctive features include the close linking of style with embodied agency, a functional distinction between style and laws or rules, and the claim that style has a kind of preconceptual 'sense' and generality. The latter two claims are the most unorthodox and are potentially of great philosophical interest, but their intelligibility is open to challenge and hinges on specifying *how* style differs from rules and conceptual generality – a task I return to in section 5.

#### 4. Situating Merleau-Ponty's conception of style

In the meantime I want to relate Merleau-Ponty's view to several competing philosophical conceptions of style. This will complement the preceding discussion by clarifying the distinctiveness and some potential advantages of Merleau-Ponty's conception of style, providing an initial indication of its broader philosophical significance. It will also pave the way for the following section by highlighting certain conceptual difficulties involved in developing a philosophically adequate conception of style.

First, Merleau-Ponty's broad application of the term clearly implies that, on his conception, 'style' cannot be limited to or privilege a specific kind of entities as its bearer. Despite his use of painting as a model, it is not just an aesthetic or artistic notion, but one applicable to any suitable configuration of form and meaning. Thus it contrasts, for example, with Kendall Walton's (2008, p. 221) suggested distinction between artworks and production processes, with the concept of style applying primarily to the latter. Merleau-Ponty's position excludes any such primacy, allowing both works and processes equally to be bearers of style. Nevertheless, it upholds the link Walton discerns by grounding style in embodied agency and emphasizing the possibility of mimetic uptake, so that artworks – as traces of embodied action – can suggest certain patterns of bodily movement, particularly those involved in their production. This grounding also explains why paintings might engage us kinaesthetically and so strike us as more expressive than photographs, and why style might be linked with 'human products' (Walton, 2008, p. 222) rather than nonhuman nature.<sup>17</sup>

Second, one might wonder how to interpret Merleau-Ponty's comments about the epistemology of style – e.g. his suggestions that agents don't need a definition of style and that artists develop their style 'unknowingly' (*à son insu*; Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 67). Such comments might seem to imply that we cannot become aware of our own style, or that immersing ourselves in practice excludes a reflective or theoretical grasp of style.<sup>18</sup> However, caution is required here. To begin with, Merleau-Ponty himself emphasizes the deliberative nature of painting in highlighting that 'Cézanne sometimes meditated for an hour' before applying a brushstroke (Merleau-Ponty, 1996b, p. 21) or that despite the rapid movements of Matisse's brush, 'it is true that his hand hesitated, that it meditated' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 63 f.).<sup>19</sup> He also presents painting as a reflective process, charged with making explicit 'premises' that are forgotten in 'profane' vision, and even as a privileged form of reflective sensibility.<sup>20</sup> So while some forms of embodied action may exclude deliberation or reflection on what one is doing, the example of painting is interesting – as Merleau-Ponty realizes – as an embodied practice that typically involves deliberation and reflection. Admittedly, some of his comments (e.g. about forgotten premises) seem to suggest that the artist's style is not the specific object of reflection. However, as the preceding comments make clear, Merleau-Ponty also recognizes that the painter's deliberation is directed to the pattern of marks being produced and thus to those artefacts in which style is manifested. This implies that at least a partial and perhaps 'indirect' awareness of style – via this pattern of marks, this work – is an integral and constant part of the painting process. In other words, some awareness of style is involved whenever a painter is being attentive to the way the painting is to be produced or how it looks. Moreover, from this it is a small step for a painter to reflect specifically on the development of his or her own style – a step that has been routinely made in the history of art

– and indeed it is difficult to see how anyone who paints regularly could fail to have some degree of such reflective awareness of their own distinctive style. A final consideration is that there is clearly a difference between our silhouette, to which third-personal access is plausibly better, and the case of painting, in which stylistic features are visibly laid out before the painter, on an external medium, and are the focus of productive attention. Given these facts, I think Merleau-Ponty is best understood as making the more modest (and more plausible) claim that a definition or specific reflective awareness is not *necessary* for the manifestation of style, but also not excluded by it.

A third question is whether – like Goethe’s, say – Merleau-Ponty’s conception of style is inherently evaluative or normative, such that style is something to be aspired to or considered inherently valuable. One might suspect it is, given the general preferences shaping his discussion, such as style over technique, indirect over direct sense, or creative over established expression. However, while these contrasts demonstrate Merleau-Ponty’s clear admiration for creative acts, their privilege is strategic, providing a methodological focus that serves to counterbalance the more common overaccentuation of concepts modelled on established or conventional norms of expression. His point is that it is only in acts of creative expression that we become aware of the mediation of style, rather than being led by familiarity to mistake established expressive means for transparent representations of things themselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 43). What such acts reveal is that indirect sense and style are pervasive, rather than being at work only in unusual situations. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of style is simply descriptive rather than having inherent evaluative implications, that is, it draws attention to certain factors involved in all world disclosure rather than identifying an unusual but inherently more valuable kind of expressive feat. As the various characterizations above – ‘system of equivalences’, ‘mode of formulation’ etc. – reflect, ‘style’ is thus for him a descriptive term referring to the patterning or configuration of forms, something’s distinctive look or arrangement.

Several further considerations emerge from the fact that style is often linked with individuality. Thus one might think each person has their own unique style, a distinctive way of doing things that defines their individuality in contrast to others. A view of this kind – summed up in the dictum ‘One artist, one style’ (Wollheim, 1987, p. 35) – is defended by Richard Wollheim, who distinguishes individual style, as an explanatory or ‘generative’ concept grounded in a single agent’s ‘psychological reality’, from the ‘general’ style of a group or age, which he sees as merely ‘taxonomic’.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, it might appear particularly apt to compare Merleau-Ponty’s and Wollheim’s conceptions of style, not only because both focus on painting, but also because the latter’s explanatory individualism might seem to parallel the former’s view of the artist’s and the body’s role.<sup>22</sup>

Merleau-Ponty’s view differs, however, from Wollheim’s in two important ways. First, it is less individualistic. For Merleau-Ponty a person’s individuality is a culminating refinement, a feat of differentiation achieved against some natural and cultural background (e.g. a specific sensorimotor makeup and enculturation) that defines an anonymous way of being we share with others.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, while his view of style allows for individuality, it simultaneously allows for, and indeed requires, a general constitution connecting us with others. Second, because it is descriptive rather than explanatory, it does not posit an exclusive causal link between an agent and their style. Hence Merleau-Ponty’s claim – one excluded by

Wollheim's generative view – that a forger who emulates Vermeer's style sufficiently well would no longer be a forger (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 76). Consequently, Merleau-Ponty's view has two advantages over Wollheim's. It not only avoids stipulating that 'style' has a different meaning in the individual and general cases, but also allows that a given person's style can evolve or change, just as a given artist (e.g. Picasso) is not bound to one style lifelong.

The link between individuality and style is taken further by Manfred Frank using a distinction between 'individuality' or 'radical singularity' that 'frustrates idealization to a linguistic type' and 'particularity', as 'the specification of a general (of a rule)' that can be 'effortlessly attained by means of deduction'. Given this distinction, 'style' for Frank (1999, p. 151) means '*individual* style, and only *in statu nascendi*. Once style has become an identifiable mannerism, its rules can then certainly be specified'. What defines style on this view is singularity or one-offness, which collapses into mere regularity or rules not only whenever the relevant features are shared with others, but also when they become a personal habit or characteristic. One might be tempted to think Merleau-Ponty shares this view, given his emphasis on creative expression and his focus on style in distinguishing indirect from direct sense. Another parallel is that Merleau-Ponty and Frank both think style differs importantly from rules and that this makes it of broad philosophical significance. This thought separates both these authors from Wollheim, who explicates style precisely in terms of adhering to 'a rule or instruction' (as a 'schema or universal') and 'dispositions' as the 'internalisation of a rule'.<sup>24</sup>

Despite their shared emphasis on creative expression, however, Frank's position goes beyond Merleau-Ponty's in claiming that this not only modifies our awareness of style but makes style itself a fragile, ephemeral phenomenon. In the next section I will further argue that the way Merleau-Ponty distinguishes style from rules differs from Frank's approach. This is fortunate, as Frank's position seems incoherent for two reasons. First, because it implies that a single person (or other entity) cannot have a distinctive, characteristic 'style'. For once some way of acting, speaking etc. becomes habitual, this realizes, in Frank's terms, a personal set of 'rules' rather than a personal 'style'. Second, more broadly, because style requires some kind of generality: a 'radical singularity' or unique instance is insufficient to define a characteristic way of doing or being, such that without applying to multiple instances the notion of 'style' as a pattern simply makes no sense.<sup>25</sup>

Frank's proposal is nonetheless instructive, as it brings into focus certain conceptual difficulties in defining style adequately. Thus one virtue of his position is its sensitivity to the risk of style collapsing into rules. Frank clearly recognizes that once generality of some kind is acknowledged, once multiple instances exhibit a distinctive pattern, it can seem that this must be describable in terms of rules (as Wollheim assumes). Similarly, he recognizes the philosophical difficulty in thinking of style as what is distinctive about an individual person, which relies on the apparently paradoxical idea of an individual generality, i.e. a general pattern applying to only one person.<sup>26</sup> Here Frank appreciates that patterns of behaviour, even if realized only by a single person, might still be describable in terms of rules, so that contrasting single and multiple agents does not suffice to conceptually distinguish style from rules.

A second virtue of Frank's position is to recognize that style is distinguished from rules by preserving a role for individuality and even singularity. Admittedly, this recognition leads him to overlook the aspect of generality that is also implied by style, but it raises the question of whether and how these two poles can be balanced. In hinting at some notion of generality that allows for singularity and individuality is the very idea of style asking the impossible? Or can style be conceived so as to make sense of the acknowledgement of singularity within a general pattern? Further, can this be done while upholding a distinction between style and rules and avoiding the incoherence of Frank's proposal? In the following I argue that Merleau-Ponty's conception of style overcomes these difficulties and that this is part of what makes it philosophically appealing.

### 5. Style versus rules

At the end of section 3 I suggested that some of Merleau-Ponty's most interesting claims depend on specifying how style is to be distinguished from rules and conceptual generality. Consideration of Frank's attempt to make such a distinction has in the meantime highlighted some of the conceptual difficulties in defining style, such as conceiving characteristic traits in a way irreducible to rules or simultaneously accommodating singularity and generality.

In Merleau-Ponty's case a potential challenge is immediately suggested by his own attempts to articulate his conception of style. While he describes various features (section 3) intended to contrast style with rule-based 'direct' sense, it might be objected that each of his descriptions either fails to make clear how style differs from rules or implies there is no such difference. Consider the label 'system of equivalences'. Merleau-Ponty uses this to distinguish the body schema's functioning from 'the recognition of some law', and that of the 'expressive system' underlying a language from 'grammatical' rules determining the meaning of words (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 216; 1969, p. 40). However, referring to a 'system' of 'equivalences' surely suggests a mode of functioning that can be described in terms of rules (e.g. equations) expressing equal values or exchangeability.<sup>27</sup> The same applies to Merleau-Ponty's distinction of style as a 'mode of formulation' from rule-governed 'techniques'. For a 'mode' or manner of formulation might sound like a stable way of painting forms that should be definable via rules it follows or approximates to. Further, although the idea of 'coherent deformation' is predicated on a deviation from a norm, as Merleau-Ponty realizes, to talk of 'coherence' again seems to imply conforming with some rule – a suspicion only enhanced by Merleau-Ponty's curious image of a hundred dials all marking the same deviation, which clearly suggests multiple rule-governed mechanisms responding uniformly. Finally, talk of a 'preconceptual generality' may seem paradoxical. How is a 'generality' to be conceived, if not in terms of some rule? And if it corresponds to a rule, in what sense is this generality 'preconceptual'?

In each case Merleau-Ponty's intended distinction is thus in danger of collapse. The resultant challenge is to explain how style can be conceived in a way genuinely distinct from, i.e. irreducible to, the functioning of rules, hence making sense of Merleau-Ponty's intended distinctions. I will address this challenge in a way that goes beyond – but seems consistent with – Merleau-Ponty's stated views and reveals the full philosophical significance of his conception of style. To this end, two different ways of thinking about meaning must be

distinguished, more precisely two ways of conceiving the relation between the general and the particular.

The first is what I will call *identity-based thinking*. The basic feature of such thought is to conceive all the particulars falling under a general classification as having some property in common that is picked out by this classification. To put it another way, it assumes that each of the particular instances is the same or identical in some respect, and that this aspect of sameness is what grounds a conception of their shared or general meaning. As a simple example, on this approach, two different tables are thought of as being the same (identical) with regard to the property of being a table (their ‘tableness’). This does not imply the two tables are spatio-temporally identical or the same in every detail. The suggestion is rather that, with identity-based thinking, classifying both entities as a table is to treat them as *notionally identical*, to *conceive* them (exclusively) under the aspect of sameness. In conceptualizing what they have in common we abstract from the differences between particulars.<sup>28</sup>

This characterization is likely to appear familiar and perhaps obvious. For this is how philosophers standardly approach the relationship between essences and their instantiation in particular entities, types and tokens, or concepts and their expression in particular speech acts. It should also be clear that the idea of a rule – reflecting what some series of events or particulars have in common – and hence the rule-governed ‘direct’ sense that Merleau-Ponty contrasts with style are inseparable from this way of thinking.

What makes the style of paintings interesting, both for Merleau-Ponty and more generally, is that it exemplifies a relation between the general and the particular that is not identity based. To see this, imagine – as a thought experiment – that, having been impressed by one of Cézanne’s paintings of Mont Sainte Victoire, you asked him to paint an exact copy of it, down to the level of individual brushstrokes. He would presumably respond that this is impossible. Indeed, it does seem humanly impossible: the way our sensorimotoric systems work makes it impossible practically to reproduce our own embodied actions exactly (beyond a certain degree of tolerance). Moreover, given the indefinitely fine grain of its marks, painting is an unforgiving medium that would capture and render visible all deviations from the first painting. Nonetheless, Cézanne might agree, unproblematically, to paint you a copy in the same style, or offer you a painting in the same style of another scene. The important point is that painting in the ‘same style’ does not require two particular paintings to be the same at any level of formal configuration (from the overall scene, through identifiable objects, down to the level of individual brushstrokes).

This highlights that familiar ways of attributing style to paintings – both our own and Merleau-Ponty’s – constitute a way of thinking about generality that does not require particular instances to be conceived as notionally identical. Rather, the generalization involved with stylistic traits is based on recognizing patterns, orderliness or similarities of configuration in the structure of paintings that need not be identical in any of their particular features. Style in painting thus exemplifies a way of thinking about the relation between the general and particular that breaks with identity-based thinking by relying on nothing more than sufficient similarity or resemblance between compositional features.<sup>29</sup>

These features of style meet the above challenge of specifying how style is genuinely distinct from the functioning of rules, allowing sense to be made of Merleau-Ponty’s various

characterizations. Thus we can understand how style's 'mode of formulation' differs from mere techniques, or mechanical repetition of the same (notionally identical) procedures. Similarly, the example of paintings demonstrates how generality can be conceived without recourse to the identity-based notions of rules and concepts. We can also appreciate what Merleau-Ponty's expression 'coherent deformation' was trying to say, i.e. that style refers to configurations of form that are recognizably cognate ('coherent') but not identical ('deformations'). Finally, the expression 'systems of equivalence' can be seen as a somewhat misleading way of describing the similarities or relationships between nonidentical paintings that lead them to be grouped under a certain style.

My claim is accordingly that Merleau-Ponty recognized and relied on this difference between style and rules as two different ways of building up patterns, or two kinds of functional relation between the general and particular. Yet it may be questioned whether this claim reflects Merleau-Ponty's own intentions. While he clearly wanted to claim *that* style differs from rules, is this *how* he understood their difference? One important consideration here is that my reading maximizes the intelligibility of Merleau-Ponty's position, given that his characterizations of style appear to *need* this break with identity-based thinking to make sense. However, I want to mention two further indications that support attribution of the position described above to Merleau-Ponty.<sup>30</sup> First, he was clearly attempting to reconceive the relationship between the universal and particular. This is perhaps clearest in *The Visible and the Invisible*, which argues that essences are grounded in facticity, rejects the facts/essence antithesis, and describes things as a differentiation of flesh rather than individuals (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, pp. 146, 149, 151). Moreover, in this ontology, flesh is 'facticity and ideality undivided', from which both individual facts and universal essences are 'abstractions' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 154). Hence – as with Merleau-Ponty's 'sensible ideas' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, pp. 193-198) – any given realization of a general 'idea' is simultaneously a sensible particular, one non-identical with every other such realization, while universals are denied any independent ontological status. Second, Merleau-Ponty's characterization of thought as *écart* (separation) rather than coincidence amounts to a shift away from identity-based thinking (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, pp. 160-166). For the idea that consciousness might 'coincide' with intentional objects corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's earlier discussions of 'direct' sense, understood as rule-governed and linked with an idealized complete contact with those objects.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, the term *écart* describes encounters with the world characterized by proximity without coincidence, corresponding to 'indirect' sense and a partial, open-ended contact with intentional objects. Accordingly, it can also be applied to the various formal configurations, linked by similarity without identity, that are grouped together under a style.

We can now appreciate how Merleau-Ponty's conception of style improves on Frank's. First, it coherently distinguishes style from rules, as two different ways of configuring meaningful patterns or relating the general and particular. This functional distinction both prevents the notion of style from collapsing into that of rules and allows its application – unlike Frank's view – to a single person's behaviour patterns. Second, Merleau-Ponty preserves a role for singularity that is balanced – again unlike Frank's view – with the recognition of generality. For saying that various instances of some shared style are non-identical implies they differ in some way, so that each simultaneously has its own

particularity or singularity. Style is hence distinguished from rules as a conception of generality that not only tolerates differences between its instances, but which constitutively requires and incorporates such differences. Bearers of style (e.g. a painting) are thus conceived as simultaneously exhibiting both generality and singularity.<sup>32</sup> In Merleau-Ponty's words, the 'phenomenon of expression' is the 'junction of the individual and the universal' (Merleau-Ponty, 1959, p. 91).<sup>33</sup> Finally, we can recognize the source of the problems with Frank's attempt to distinguish style from rules. Despite his promising focus on the relation between the general and particular, Frank failed to recognize that these can be correlated in different ways, assuming instead that generality can only be conceived according to rules and what I have called identity-based thinking.

## 6. The significance of style

To conclude, I want briefly to assess the philosophical significance of style, as Merleau-Ponty conceived it. Clearly, it has great importance within the context of his own thinking. As the first two sections above showed, Merleau-Ponty applies the notion of style broadly and assigns it two major roles, making it central to his definition of all intentional structures and holding that conceptual or rule-governed meaning is founded in its 'indirect' sense. The fourth section further provided some indications of its significance in a wider philosophical context, particularly in aesthetics, as a conception of style. In both these contexts the philosophical appeal of Merleau-Ponty's conception of style was seen to depend largely on whether it differs in its operation from rules. The previous section argued that it does this by breaking with identity-based thinking, reconceiving the relation between the general and particular in a way that renders Merleau-Ponty's own position intelligible and allows it to overcome difficulties faced by any philosophical conception of style (e.g. Frank's). However, this same feature – its break with identity-based thinking – also potentially makes the notion of style of far broader philosophical significance.

Merleau-Ponty's own position recognizes this potential and the two major roles he assigns style project it to the extreme, implying that the notion of style is of fundamental philosophical importance as the keystone of a general theory of meaning. Yet his claims about both these roles are likely to be challenged. To begin with, this is likely – as hinted in section 2 – in relation to (perceptible) features of the natural environment. Given his focus on perception and the unity/cohesion of intentional structures, many might object that a more realist account is needed of the 'natural world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 381). That is, even if it is accepted – as Merleau-Ponty claims – that any *experience* of the latter (in the lifeworld) is unified by style, it might be objected that in themselves natural entities or features have a kind of unity that is independent of any conditions under which they are experienceable.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, many would oppose Merleau-Ponty's claim that rule-based meaning is generally founded in the indirect sense of style. My aim here is not to side with either of these objections; nor is it to endorse uncritically Merleau-Ponty's highly general claims about the role of style. Either assessing the two challenges adequately or establishing these general claims would require further argument going far beyond the bounds of a single paper. However, as I will now argue, it is not necessary to endorse his highly general claims to appreciate the importance of Merleau-Ponty's conception of style as a way of conceiving the configuration of form and meaning. In fact, a more limited focus will suffice to show both

that Merleau-Ponty's own claims are overgeneralizations and that, despite this, his conception of style is of broad philosophical significance in two ways.

Consider first the kind of case Merleau-Ponty takes as paradigmatic and to which his conception of style seems particularly suited. Thus, as an example of embodied agency and intelligence in action, painting plausibly demonstrates the human capacity to produce and recognize patterns unified by style, as part of what distinguishes our behavioural abilities from highly predictable mechanical or regular responses. Accordingly, the first way Merleau-Ponty's notion of style has broader philosophical significance lies in accurately characterizing embodied activities that exhibit the kind of loose nonmechanical cohesion, flexibility, and openness to particularity that is exemplified in painting.

It may seem tempting to agree with Merleau-Ponty that style, as he conceives it, should be seen as a general trait of embodied action. However, embodied agents are clearly also capable of inventing and performing activities that are paradigmatically rule-governed. For example, despite the fact that it is also typically enacted by embodied agents using an external medium, mathematics is an activity that is more accurately described in terms of rules than style. This can be highlighted by considering what I shall call the iterability of mathematical operations, the fact that all particular performances of a given operation (e.g. a calculation) yield the same outcome, with the same validity, and instantiate the same general truth. The identity-based concept of rules is perfectly suited to capture this feature of mathematics, which is in turn implied by the equivalence or notional identity of all these performances. By contrast, to be governed by style, in Merleau-Ponty's sense, would entail relaxing this iterability condition, so that repeating operations (or attempting to) need yield only similar but not identical outcomes. Relaxing this condition goes beyond the use of an unconventional or individualistic rule, as in Wittgenstein's example (1995, p. 336 [§185]) of a student who appears to master the rule '+2' up to 1000, but then continues beyond 1000 with 1004, 1008 etc. For this student's deviant practice continues to be governed by considerations of sameness:<sup>35</sup> if the student did not reliably reproduce the same results (below and above 1000 respectively) and instead derived something different from the 'rule' each time, then this would no longer be a mathematical practice but would become, say, an exercise in free association or improvisation. It is this latter case that is analogous to the manifestation of style in Merleau-Ponty's sense. Hence, as the analogy suggests, because it breaks with the iterability condition, in preserving a role for particularity, Merleau-Ponty's notion of style cannot be applied to mathematics.

Many philosophers may instead be tempted to think that rules can be conceived less strictly than the example of mathematics suggests so as to cover the kinds of case characterized above in terms of style. More specifically, it might be suggested that the style manifested by a series of paintings can be understood as either approximating to rules or as something that is partially governed yet underdetermined by rules.<sup>36</sup> Although they may initially seem workable and attractive, the problem with both these proposals is that they misrepresent the relation of general to particular, construing it reductively in terms of identity while disqualifying the aspect of particularity that is constitutive of non-identity-based practices such as painting. This particularity is instead conceptualized either as a *failure* to match rules (approximation) or as highlighting a *limitation* in the application, i.e. the role, of rules (underdetermination). Both proposals thus involve relaxing a constraint that is itself still

identity-based, and continue to conceive practices as governed by considerations of sameness, rather than allowing – as Merleau-Ponty's conception of style does – that singularity and non-identity may have an important role. For this reason, painting is an activity that cannot be adequately characterized using the identity-based notion of rules.

The contrast between painting and mathematics is therefore instructive in two ways. First, it serves as a warning against overgeneralizing either as a model. While the example of mathematics shows that not all embodied actions exhibit style, that of painting shows – against a more common overgeneralization – that some forms of intelligent activity are not properly characterized in terms of rules. Second, it encourages us to consider more closely which factors underlie the functional difference between the two cases. Thus in addition to being mediated by the body's sensorimotoric capacities, painting is an activity in which there is great freedom to vary forms and which is enacted on an external medium that accurately and verifiably tracks the continuously variable forms of a painter's movements. It is this freedom and sensitivity to fine differences that makes painting highly conducive to the manifestation of style.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, mathematics is a highly constrained practice that uses a discretely structured sign system and in which mediation by sensorimotoric abilities plays no essential role. In other words, the requirement for strictly reproducible uniform results – reflecting and anchoring its role in the wider context of human practices – leads mathematical practices to be structured in a way that excludes the manifestation of style in Merleau-Ponty's sense.

Hence, the second way Merleau-Ponty's notion of style proves to be of broader philosophical significance is in enabling more adequate appreciation and conception of the variety of (functional) forms that embodied intelligence can manifest. It does this by providing an alternative to identity-based thinking and rules in conceiving the relation between the general and particular. The availability of this alternative makes it possible to recognize that – and articulate why – some cases are not well characterized by rules, and to enquire whether any given case (e.g. a given embodied practice) is best described in terms of style or rules. Although this question presumably admits no general answer, Merleau-Ponty's notion of style thus enables meaningful debate about, and more accurate description of, the variety of forms embodied intelligent activity takes.

Another interesting example for such debate is habit. Many philosophers describe habits in terms of rules or norms, such that each performance of a habitual action is taken to be a performance of the 'same' action, often in the 'same' context. By contrast, for Merleau-Ponty motor habits are a model for all habits (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 177), so that the habitual patterning of behaviour is characterized by style (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 169), allowing for the fact that our body (schema) spontaneously adapts to circumstances that are typically not identical. Accordingly, one might ask whether habits are best conceived in terms of rules or style. What matters in deciding this is how the habitual activity in question is structured – for example, whether it involves inscribing outputs in a discretely structured formal space (as with typing) – and whether various habitual performances can be conceived as constituting the same act.<sup>38</sup> Again, these questions presumably have no general answer, with the implication that habits are not all alike. Nevertheless, as with the contrast between painting and mathematics as practices, the significance of Merleau-Ponty's conception of

style lies in both accurately characterizing some cases and making possible meaningful debate over the relative importance of style and rules in others.

Finally, a clarification: although I have sympathized with Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that style is characteristic of embodied agency, my aim is not to claim that embodiment is essential to manifesting style. To be sure, Merleau-Ponty holds that the human body – as a 'general power of motoric formulation' – provides the (causal) basis of many intentional structures characterized by style. However, this commitment is not entailed by his notion of style, provided the latter is taken (as here) to be descriptive rather than explanatory or generative (as with Wollheim). Instead of claiming that something has style *because* it is produced by embodied agency, or that *only* embodied agents can exhibit style, the thought I have relied on here is merely that embodied agency typically exemplifies style. This is not to deny on principle that other natural or artificial systems could also exhibit style. Rather, it is to take the notion of style – as a mode of patterning not governed by rules or identity – as specifying a standard against which the behaviour of any system, human or otherwise, can be assessed.<sup>39</sup> Showing, for example, that a computer is able to produce behaviour characterized by style may erode a previously robust empirical difference between embodied and artificial agents, but it would not in any way undermine Merleau-Ponty's conception of style.<sup>40</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Meacham (2013) provides a clear and persuasive overview of Husserl's concept of style, which Merleau-Ponty describes as capturing our 'original relation to the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 79).

<sup>2</sup> A working note from May 1959 identifies Merleau-Ponty's goal as 'a theory of perception and understanding' such that 'understanding is to grasp through coexistence, laterally, by style [*en style*]' (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 239).

<sup>3</sup> This view of objects is found in Husserl, for whom the 'real object' is 'an infinite idea' that is correlative 'to the idea of a complete experiential evidence, a complete synthesis of possible experiences', or 'the absolutely complete evidence that gives the object itself in all that it is' (Husserl 1950, p. 97 f. [§§28-29]).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he emphasizes that positing a single object does this Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 84, 383.

<sup>5</sup> See Maherne (2017) for an excellent discussion of the unifying function of style in Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual constancy and perceptual experience.

<sup>6</sup> The 'primacy of perception' lies in showing us the 'true conditions of objectivity' (Merleau-Ponty, 1996a, p. 67 f.).

<sup>7</sup> Singer (1981, p. 160) somewhat confusingly claims that for Merleau-Ponty style effects 'perceptual closure'. Although he grounds the cohesion of intentional structures in style, it is central to Merleau-Ponty's position that intentional structures remain 'open' rather than attaining 'closure'.

<sup>8</sup> The 'perceived thing is not an ideal unity' such as 'a geometric notion' (Merleau-Ponty, 1996a, p. 49). As 'open ensembles' recognized through a 'certain style of development',

‘perceived things’ differ from ‘geometrical objects’ because they are not ‘completed entities’ with a ‘law of construction’ that we possess ‘a priori’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 404).

<sup>9</sup> As Meacham (2013, p. 5) suggests.

<sup>10</sup> I discuss the relevance of these texts for Merleau-Ponty’s conception of language in Inkpin 2016, pp. 119-146.

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty discusses at length the irreducibility of artistic expression to the biographical facts that nonetheless condition it in ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ (see in particular Merleau-Ponty, 1996b, p. 25 f.).

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, ‘like the body schema’ and ‘the identity of one’s own body’, the identity of a perceived object ‘is a system of equivalences that is not founded on the recognition of some law’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 216).

<sup>13</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, 1969, pp. 43, 64 f. and Inkpin, 2016, pp. 111-114. Similar rejections of ‘inventories’ are found at Merleau-Ponty 1959, p. 74 and 1964b, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Goethe (1998) and Kant (1983, pp. 407-410 [§47]). It also corresponds to Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the ability to project possibilities, the ‘concrete freedom’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 158) that Schneider lacks.

<sup>15</sup> See, in particular Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, pp. 140-169.

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 165-6) emphasized the link between movement and painting in his 1953 lectures at the Collège de France. This link is nicely described by Elkins (1999, pp. 96-101).

<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, it does not support Walton’s (2008, p. 223) projection of mood predicates onto stylistic patterns, which overassimilates artistic expression to the manifestation of psychological states (see note 11). Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body schema also hints at the possibility of nonhuman embodied agents grounding style.

<sup>18</sup> One might, for example, be tempted to assimilate painting to Dreyfus’s ‘smooth coping’, such that conscious deliberation on what one is doing interrupts skilled execution. On this view, ‘monitoring’ is ‘aloof and detached’ and impedes the ‘flow’ of expert performance (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986, p. 40) – ‘I only deliberate when coping is blocked’ (Dreyfus, 2002, p. 381).

<sup>19</sup> See my discussion of painting as a deliberative activity in Inkpin, 2016, pp. 138-143.

<sup>20</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, pp. 20-21, 30, and 13 respectively.

<sup>21</sup> This view is defended in Wollheim 1979; 1987, pp. 26-36; and 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Especially given Wollheim’s (1987, p. 27) claim that ‘style reaches deeper into the body [...] it has psycho-motor reality’.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, his account of the multilayered *Sinngebung* that conditions human freedom (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 501-511).

<sup>24</sup> Wollheim 1995, p. 38. See also Wollheim 1979, pp. 135-137. Regarding philosophical writing, Lang (1995, pp. 19-23) similarly distinguishes individual ‘style’ from rule-like and universal ‘method’.

<sup>25</sup> One might object that, unlike a single use of language (Frank’s preferred model), a single painting can instantiate a style. However, this is possible only because a painting’s multiplicity of marks has a richness of structure that a ‘radical singularity’ lacks.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Husserl's (1952, p. 278) odd talk of a person's style as a 'particular individual type' [*besonderer Individualtypus*].

<sup>27</sup> Merleau-Ponty himself suggests in one passage that creative expression requires finding 'the rule of equivalences [*règle des équivalences*] and substitutions that it allows' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 43).

<sup>28</sup> Well known critics of this approach include Nietzsche and Adorno. Nietzsche maligns it as the 'origin of the logical', neglect of the particular and 'treating what is similar as the same' (Nietzsche, 1980, p. 471 [GS §111]; cf. p. 592 f. [§345]). For Horkheimer/Adorno (1988, p. 137 f.) it results in the 'style of the culture industry' – or rather its 'negation of style' – as the 'murky identity' of the universal and particular.

<sup>29</sup> This parallels Wittgenstein's (1995, p. 278 [§67]) appeal to 'family resemblances' to explain the cohesion of concepts via the manifold ways appearances are 'related' – no one looks exactly the same as the family members they resemble.

<sup>30</sup> Such that he at least anticipates it, just as Husserl foreshadowed Merleau-Ponty's own thinking (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, pp. 198-202).

<sup>31</sup> The latter link is suggested, for example, by Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 63n. See also Inkpin, 2016, p. 111 f.

<sup>32</sup> Painting for Merleau-Ponty exhibits, as Crowther (1993, p. 109) puts it, the 'interplay of the general and particular dimensions of embodiment'. Carman (2008, p. 205 f.) similarly recognizes that Merleau-Ponty's conception of style overcomes the 'artificially polarized categories of particular and universal'.

<sup>33</sup> This dual general/particular character defines the 'concrete' for Merleau-Ponty – see his descriptions of 'concrete essences' and the 'concrete subject' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 147, 514).

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty might reject this objection as an example of 'objective thinking'. Nonetheless, it cannot be dismissed as simply misunderstanding his position. Rather, it is a substantive objection to his position, to the effect that it is philosophically mistaken for a conception of *all* 'perceived things' – especially the 'natural world' – to answer to their conditions of experienceability.

<sup>35</sup> Wittgenstein has the deviant student explicitly claiming to be going on 'in the same way' (*ibid.*).

<sup>36</sup> I discuss elsewhere how both these strategies can be discerned in Wittgenstein's later work on rule-following (Inkpin, 2016, pp. 182-193).

<sup>37</sup> The same features – embodiment, enaction, and its use of an external medium – also make it a potentially interesting case of so-called 4e cognition.

<sup>38</sup> This may depend, for example, on whether a notation can be found that defines their identity, as Goodman (1976, p. 197) suggests occurred in the case of music. The contrast between typing and painting as habits is nicely illustrated by Wentworth (2004, p. 50 f.).

<sup>39</sup> The combination of generality and individuality typical of biological systems (see, for example, Thompson, 2007, p. 169) might – as Merleau-Ponty presumably intended – be plausibly characterized using his conception of style.

<sup>40</sup> I would like to thank an anonymous referee of the EJP for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper as well as Graham Priest, Greg Restall and Maurita Harney, who pressed me in Melbourne to be more precise about the relation between style, rules and habits.

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