# Mental Files and the Theory of Fiction: A Reply to Zoltán Vecsey

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In this work I reply to Zoltán Vecsey's criticisms of the semantic account of fictional names I put forward in Orlando (2017). The main tenet of that proposal is that fictional names refer to individual concepts, which I understand in terms of mental files. In Vecsey (2020), the author presents three main objections: (i) no referential shift can be ascribed to fictional names, (ii) fictional names are supposed to play two conflicting functions, and (iii) the mental file framework is incompatible with an antirealist view of fictional objects. Although the objections are deep and thoughtful, the challenge they involve can be met if certain aspects of the proposal are clarified and developed. | Keywords: *Fictional Name, Fictional Concept, Mental File, Fictional Narrative, Antirealism vs. Realism About Fiction*

In *Fictional Objects within the Theory of Mental Files: Problems and Prospects* (Vecsey, 2020), Zoltán Vecsey does two main things: (i) he criticises the thesis that mental file theory allows for a particular grounding of antirealism about fictional discourse, which I proposed in my (2017) paper; and (ii) he defends the view that mental file theory fits better with realism than with antirealism about fiction. In this reply, I will be concerned with his objections but will not examine his positive view. Although Vecsey's objections are rigorous, interesting and thoughtful, I think that the above-mentioned proposal has been partially misinterpreted. I will then attempt to clarify some aspects of my semantic position regarding fictional names so as to make it clear how it can be considered to meet Vecsey's main objections.

The core purpose of my (2017) paper has been defending the thesis that fictional names refer to individual concepts, which in turn I proposed to construe in terms of mental files. Files are a new way of conceiving of particular concepts, whether individual or indexical: a mental file is a mental representation that stores and anchors information (and misinformation) about a certain particular under a certain label (Perry, 2001; Jeshion, 2009 and 2010; Korta and Perry, 2011; Recanati 2012). Mental files are relationally, as opposed to satisfactionally, identified: in a paradigmatic case, whereas

a descriptive concept applies to a particular by virtue of the fact that it satisfies a certain description (satisfactionally), a mental file applies to a particular by virtue of the fact that it is directly related to it (relationally). The set of direct relations between a mental file and the corresponding particular includes perception, memory, testimony, and the historical chains of communication underlying the use of proper names – those relations are usually characterised as different forms of 'acquaintance'. By deploying mental files one is able to entertain thoughts about particulars, namely, singular thoughts. That capacity is thus naturally associated with the capacity to use sentences containing genuinely referential expressions, like proper names and indexicals. Files are then the mental counterparts of singular terms; as just explained, they are individual and indexical concepts.

Now, to defend my central claim, I have argued that when an author introduces a fictional name in the process of creating a fictional narrative, even if there is no typical material particular she is related to, she can be taken to open a mental file for a fictional character – since files need not be grounded on typical material particulars. It is then possible to think that *her referential intention is directed towards the file opened in association with the character's name*, whose main function is to store and anchor information and misinformation concerning that character. Now, the consequent thesis that the fictional name refers to the corresponding file can be considered to be a novel application of Frege's idea that the kind of entity a word refers to depends on the kind of sentential context in which the word occurs – from now on, I will allude to it as Frege's *Referential Shift* thesis.

According to Frege (1892), when occurring in certain sentential contexts, such as direct quotations and attitude ascriptions, words must be taken to refer not to the usual objects they refer to, such as typical material particulars, but to themselves or to their customary senses, respectively. The following fragment makes this idea manifest:

> If words are used in the ordinary way, what one intends to speak of is their reference. It can also happen, however, that one wishes to talk about the words themselves or their sense. This happens, for instance, when the words of another are quoted. One's own words then first designate words of the other speaker, and only the latter have their usual reference. We then have signs of signs. In writing, the words are in this case enclosed in quotation marks. Accordingly, a word standing between quotation marks must not be taken as having its ordinary reference. [...] In reported speech one talks about the sense, e.g., of another person's remarks. It is quite clear that in this way of speaking words do not have their customary reference but designate what is usually their sense. In order to have a short expression, we will say: in reported speech, words are used *indirectly* or have their *indirect* reference. (Frege, 1892, pp. 58-9)

Quotation marks and most psychological verbs are thus indicative of a departure from usual reference, namely, of a *referential shift*; words themselves and senses are the kinds of entities reference might shift to. My idea was then that in writing fiction, as there is no possible outward referential

intention, one could take reference to shift from typical material particulars to concepts in the realm of thought. In other words, since the author of a fictional narrative is not *primarily* concerned with the typical material world, the fictional names she introduces can be thought to refer to the mental files she opens for her characters, namely, to fictional individual concepts. Falling short of a syntactic device like quotation marks or psychological verbs, it is the *author's referential intentions* that can be thought to do the job, namely, signalling the presence of what Frege called an "oblique" context, that is, a context in which reference has shifted.[1]

As is clear from Frege's account, the ontological commitment to both words and senses is motivated independently of the *Referential Shift* thesis: the existence of words as units of language is taken for granted, and senses are posited to account for the difference in cognitive significance between pairs of sentences containing different but co-referential terms – namely, to solve the so-called Frege's Puzzle (Salmon, 1983). As it happens, the ontological commitment to mental files is also justified on independent reasons, since, as above emphasised, files are posited to account for singular thoughts or thoughts about particulars.

Now, Vecsey summarises his first objection in the following terms: "a referential shift cannot be elicited by intention alone." (Vecsey, 2020, p. 40)[2] But, in so claiming, I think that he is misinterpreting my application of Frege's *Referential Shift* thesis. My original idea is neither that (i) fictional names start by being empty names and then shift their referents to mental files, nor that (ii) fictional names shift their referents to the different readers' mental files according to the context of use, as it would follow if they behaved like demonstratives. As he acknowledges a few lines ahead (pp. 40-41), I maintain that fictional names refer to mental files from the very first moment and all along: the files referred to originate in the author's mind during the process of creating the fictional narrative, and then give rise to the types of files constituting the thoughts that structure that narrative. The shift from usual material referents to files is determined by the fact that fictional names occur in peculiar sentential contexts, namely, when the corresponding sentences are used to create, read, interpret or critically analyse fiction – in other terms, when the corresponding sentences are fictively, parafictively or metafictively used. As is known, fictive uses are the uses of fictional sentences, by authors and readers, within the framework of the fictional narrative (such as the use of the first sentence in *The hound of the Baskervilles*, "Mr. Sherlock Holmes, who was usually very late in the mornings, save upon those not infrequent occasions when he was up all night, was seated at the breakfast table"); parafictive uses are reports of the fictional story facts from an external perspective (as in uttering "Holmes is a detective" in the course of a lecture on British literature); and, finally, metafictive ones are uses of fictional sentences

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[1]    As pointed out by Simpson (1964, pp. 113-4), Frege does not provide us with a general criterion to recognise the kinds of sentential contexts that involve a referential shift.

[2]    All the ensuing quotations of Vecsey's work belong to the same article.

to state facts that are, characteristically, not part of the fictional story (as when claiming "Holmes is an interesting character" or "Holmes does not exist").[3]

More specifically, when an author introduces a fictional name in the process of creating a fictional narrative, she can be taken to open a mental file for a fictional character. In as far as that file is going to be tokened (or instanced) many times throughout the creation of the narrative, the different tokens (or instances) give rise to a certain *type of file*. Introducing a fictional name involves establishing a correlation between a name-type and a file-type that will end up being part of a fixed system of correlations between sentence-types involving that name and thought-types involving the corresponding file – a system that constitutes the *conceptual world of the fiction* at stake. That correlation (between a name-type and a file-type) can be construed as a referential relation, featuring on an unusual sentential context, namely, one in which *the speaker's (namely, the author's) referential intention targets not a typical material object but a character*, given that she is involved in creating fiction. Likewise, when someone reads, memorises, recites or critically approaches that narrative, she will be taking part in a communication chain leading to that file-type, namely, she will be borrowing the name's referent by inserting himself in a chain originated by the author's creation.[4]

A clarification point is in order. The previous thesis does not amount to the claim that the author has a conscious intention to refer to her mental file: she has the conscious intention to refer to a fictional character, her invention, a figment of her imagination, which can be theoretically construed, unbeknownst to her, as a mental file. In other terms, *the author has an intention concerning an object that is, as a matter of fact, a mental file but is not represented as such in the author's mind*.

This idea can be rendered, more technically, in terms of the *transparent/opaque* distinction (Quine, 1956): according to this distinction, the linguistic ascription of a complex mental state (namely, a propositional attitude) to a subject can be interpreted in two different ways. On the transparent interpretation, also called *de re*, it expresses a relation between the subject and a certain particular, independently of how the particular is characterised (in the ascription). On the opaque interpretation, also called *de dicto*, it expresses a relation between the subject and a specific characterisation of a (purported) particular (included in the ascription). To take a simple example, if Mark believes, concerning a certain painter, Caravaggio, whose real name, Michelangelo Merisi, he ignores, that he was the best Baroque painter, the belief ascription "Mark believes that Michelangelo Merisi was the best Baroque painter" comes out true on the transparent interpretation, since the painter he is related to in having that belief was as a matter of fact Michelangelo Merisi, but is false on the opaque one, since Mark cannot characterise that painter by his real name, 'Merisi', but can only use his pseudonym, 'Caravaggio'. Likewise,

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3    For the difference among fictive, parafictive and metafictive uses, also called 'textual', 'paratextual' and 'metatextual', see, for instance, Bonomi (2008) and García-Carpintero (2015).

4    Throughout this note, I will use the feminine pronoun for the author and the masculine pronoun for the reader/critic.

when I claim that the author of a fictional narrative can be ascribed the intention to refer to her own file for a character, I mean that she can be ascribed an intention directed towards an object which, as a matter of fact, is a mental file but would not be described by her in those terms – given the fact that she is a creator of fiction, not a philosopher of language, and, as such, may have no particular metaphysical conception of fictional characters. The ascription to the author of a referential intention directed towards her own file must be interpreted in the transparent, not in the opaque, sense – in other terms, it is true on the transparent, not on the opaque, interpretation. In my opinion, it is the fact that Vecsey does not take this distinction into account that leads him to the misunderstanding that transpires in the following quote:

> Perhaps the first token occurrence of 'Sherlock Holmes' in the novel *A Study in Scarlet* refers already to a mental representation. Although this token occurrence seems to refer to a person within its host sentence, this is only a surface semantic effect. Actually, Conan Doyle introduced the name of his protagonist to refer to its mode of presentation (i.e., the HOLMES file). So the argument may go. This would be a more plausible explanation for the alleged referential shift in the semantic profile of the name. If it is correct to assume that the profile of names depends, at least in part, on the semantically relevant aspects of their introduction, for example, in the semantic or communicative intentions of their introducers, then it can be imagined that instances of a certain kind of name are designed so that they refer to mental objects. The question is whether authors of fictional works introduce character names into their narratives in this manner. Regretfully, a definitive answer would require a lengthy excursion into the cognitive/psychological theory of artistic creation, which is beyond the scope of this paper. (p. 40)

To emphasise my previous point, the application of Frege's *Referential Shift* thesis to sentences containing fictional names has not been proposed as a psychological hypothesis about what creators of fiction have consciously in mind when writing their narratives, and, in particular, when they introduce names for their characters: it is a *semantic hypothesis*, more specifically, a hypothesis concerning both the referential status of fictional names and the ontological status of the corresponding referents, namely, something they might be completely unaware of *qua* competent speakers. From my perspective, not only the author but also the readers and critics of *A Study in Scarlet* can be considered to be referring to a fictional character, Holmes, in the intuitive sense of 'referring' and the intuitive sense of 'fictional character'; but the theoretical status of that relation and the metaphysical nature of that fictional character can be, and usually are, beyond their ken.

Moving now into Vecsey's second objection, it is summarised in the following terms: on my account, "character names are supposed to perform two conflicting functions in fictional narratives." (p. 40) The following fragment of the text expands on this idea:

> [...] On the one hand, there is a semantic relation between the character name 'Holmes' and the HOLMES file. On the other, there is a semantic relation that relates 'Holmes' to the Holmes character. And this is

something that cannot be integrated into a coherent semantic picture because 'Holmes' is related at once both to a concrete particular (i.e. HOLMES file) and to an abstract object (i.e. the Holmes character). (p. 42)

This is an important objection that presses the need for clarifying a metaphysical point concerning mental files, namely, for giving a precise answer to the question about what kind of object a mental file is from a metaphysical point of view. The core of the answer is that there is no conflict because the HOLMES file *is* the HOLMES character, namely, a *type of concept* (or a *concept-type*), and, as such, an abstract object of some sort.

As previously explained, on my proposal, the HOLMES file, namely, the referent of 'Holmes', is conceived of in terms of a type of file that originates out of the many instances of the file tokened in Doyle's mind during the process of creating his novels – namely, it is grounded on many file-tokens. There is nothing else to the Holmes character than that very file-type. So, the Holmes character is a type of concept, grounded on multiple tokens of concepts, which are, as pointed out by Vecsey, concrete particulars. But the type at stake is an *abstract* object, in the same sense in which types of things in general – in particular, word-types and sentence-types – can be considered to be abstract objects.

Moreover, as stated before, I have proposed to conceive of a fictional narrative in terms of a set of sentence-types semantically correlated with a set of thought-types, which are grounded on the tokens entertained by the author during the creation process.[5] Thought-types are constituted by concept-types, among which we find the individual and the indexical ones, namely, mental files. Accordingly, *A Study in Scarlet* can be construed as a set of correlations between sentences-types and thought-types, among which, there are the ones containing the (individual) file-type HOLMES.

Given that literature is an allographic art (Goodman, 1968), literary artworks, as opposed to paintings and sculptures, are some sort of abstract object with multiple concrete instances. An author creates a fictional narrative by creating an instance or exemplar of it: in my terms, by semantically correlating, at a particular time and a concrete place, a certain set of sentence-types with a certain set of thought-types, grounded on her own thought-tokens. The initial literary exemplar is thus a set of sentence-tokens that gets semantically correlated with an author's (set of) thought-types; literary exemplars might thus be construed as semantic vehicles of thought-types. In as far as our main topic, fictional names, is concerned, a certain name-type gets semantically correlated with a certain file-type, which thereby becomes its referent.

In footnote 11 of his article, Vecsey claims that my main thesis about the reference of fictional names is in tension with the externalist conception of reference that I favour. With regard to this, I would like to point out that there is a sense in which 'the external world' can be thought to encompass both the usual material particulars and the concepts (however conceived of) that are common to the members of a certain linguistic community (or, for that matter, of different

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[5]    As should be clear, this characterisation is restricted to so-called purely linguistic fictional narratives, among which we find literary artworks.

linguistic communities), in as far as both kinds of entities belong to a public or shared domain. Likewise, artworks (however conceived of) are also public and, as such, can be considered to be part of 'the external world'.

Finally, Vecsey's last objection is epitomised in the following sentence: "the mental file framework is incompatible with the antirealist view of fictional objects." (p. 42) I think this is also an interesting piece of criticism, which deserves to be answered in some detail. First of all, Vecsey is right in claiming that "Orlando's mental file framework was designed to demonstrate that the antirealist theory of fictional objects can be reconciled with the claim that fictional utterances express propositions that are not imaginatively true, but instead true in the real world." (p. 43) But, as I see things at present, I agree with him that this is a mistake. I no longer consider all uses of fictional discourse to be truth-assessable. As explained with some detail in my article (Orlando, 2021), I tend to think that fictive uses (namely, uses of the sentences constitutive of a fictional narrative either by the author or by its subsequent readers) are not assertions, and hence not susceptible of being true or false, but speech acts with a *declarative force*, namely, those acts whose illocutionary point is to create something, "cases where one brings a state of affairs into existence by declaring it to exist." (Searle, 1969, p. 358) The general point is that if an author successfully performs the act of creating a narrative in which certain characters are featured in a fictional story, then there is such a narrative.

More specifically, the speech act involved in the fictive use of a sentence by the creator of a fiction might be assigned two illocutionary points, along the lines of *the promulgation of a law by a legislato*r: "Promulgating a law has both a declarational status (the propositional content becomes law) and a directive status (the law is directive in intent)." (Searle, 1969, pp. 368-369) Likewise, an original fictive use has also both a *declarational* status, since its content becomes part of a literary artwork, and a directive status, since that content has a normative function in relation to future uses by readers and critics. They cannot then be classified as true or false. As for subsequent fictive uses by readers, they also have a declarative force but they seem to follow the pattern of *the application of a law by a judge* – rather than its promulgation by a legislator: they enforce the narrative as much as a judge's decision enforces a pre-existent legislation, to which she must be faithful. Both kinds of declarative acts are regimented, by the pre-existent law and the pre-existent fictional narrative, respectively. Subsequent fictive uses are thus to be classified not as true or false but as faithful or unfaithful to the conceptual world of a (pre-existent) fictional narrative. Finally, parafictive uses (those conveying the fictional story facts from an external perspective, in words that are different from the original ones) could also be ascribed, at least in part, a declarative status akin to a judge's application of a pre-existent legislation. But, given that they involve a *reformulation* of the author's original discourse, they can be assimilated to those cases in which the law is not directly applied but involves the judge's previous interpretation.[6]

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[6]    A more detailed explanation of the grounds for ascribing a declarative illocutionary force to fictive and parafictive uses of fictional sentences can be found in Orlando (2021).

It is worth pointing out that this hypothesis concerning the speech act status of fictive and parafictive uses of fictional discourse is not in tension with the core thesis that fictional names refer to individual concepts, since the presence of a reference relation is compatible with different kinds of speech acts: fiction may involve reference even if it does involve assertion and, hence, truth.

Vecsey goes on by claiming that mental files are "'hybrid' existents, which satisfy the standard criteria both of concreteness and abstractness." (p. 43) As explained above, mental files are individual concepts, which, along cognitivist lines, can be understood as *mental representations*. Another option is, as is known, going Platonist, and construing concepts in terms of universals; but, as Vecsey himself acknowledges, this is not the tradition, characteristic of Fodor (1990) and Perry (1980), I explicitly identify myself with. Without intending to go deep into metaphysical waters, I would like to point out that mental representations are *concrete particulars* that typically give rise to *types*, which, as claimed above, are not concrete particulars but abstract entities of some sort: there is a sense in which different people (or, for that matter, the same person at different times) can be considered to share a mental representation, namely, a representation-type that plays a certain role or has a certain content, even if it can be tokened in different minds (or in the same mind at different times). As is known, this type-token ambiguity is also present regarding linguistic entities such as words and sentences. If this is what Vecsey means by 'hybridity', I agree with him, but it is necessary to take into account that this is a phenomenon that conspicuously affects other entities besides mental files.

Vecsey then concludes that "the central claims of the mental file framework are incompatible with the antirealist view." (p. 43) More specifically, he voices the following complaint:

> She [that is, I] contends that if readers want to talk about the protagonist of a fictional work, then their referential intention is directed to something that belongs to the conceptual/abstract realm. And, on her view, this conceptual/abstract something exists contingently: it comes into being through an author's storytelling activity. But this is precisely what certain advocates of fictional realism claim. (p. 43)

He is right in demanding an explanation of why I take my position to be a version of antirealism – or, as I called it in my (2021) paper, an instance of 'moderate fictionalism'.[7] Although the difference between my position and a realist one, in particular, abstractism, may not be considered to be significant, I think the two kinds of positions are in fact different enough.[8]

As pointed out before, my proposal involves an ontological commitment to descriptive concepts and mental files, thoughts made out of them, and fictional narratives, constituted in part by those thoughts (and in part by the sentence-types chosen by their respective authors). Fictional narratives, conceived of as sets of pairs of sentence-types and thought-types, are some kind of abstract

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[7]    For a radical version of fictionalism, see, for instance, Predelli (2020).

[8]    For abstractism about fictional entities, see, for instance, Thomasson (1999), Salmon (2002), Voltolini (2006). I have also defended a version of abstractism in Orlando (2016).

object. In as far as fictional names are taken to refer to mental files, they refer to parts of the abstract objects that are the fictional narratives in which they occur. But those narratives' parts are *concept-types*, which in turn need not be conceived of as universals but can be construed in terms of *relations of resemblance among particulars*, i.e., relations among qualitatively similar mental representations tokened both in the author's and the readers and critics' minds. Consequently, the only ontological commitment it involves, aside from the commitment to narratives, is the relatively uncontroversial *commitment to concept-types* partly constitutive of them, which might be in turn conceived of in terms of resembling mental particulars.[9] Be that as it may, there is a long path to go from those types to peculiar or *sui generis* abstract entities that are created *simultaneously* with fictional narratives (hence, on top of them), as is the case with the cultural artefacts with which typical abstractist approaches identify literary characters. The main point of my proposal is pointing to the possibility of combining the notion of reference to concepts with antirealism about fiction, on grounds of the fact that concepts are not a peculiar or *sui generi*s kind of abstract entities but the ubiquitous constituents of our thoughts. An antirealist about fiction, or a moderate fictionalist, need not deny that there are concepts and thoughts, need she?

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[9] For a clear exposition and defence of Resemblance Nominalism, see Rodriguez-Pereyra (2002).

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