

# Some Remaining Problems for Fictional File Theory

A Short Reply to Eleonora Orlando

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Mental file theory has recently attracted growing interest among philosophers of mind and philosophers of language. Some experts are of the opinion that the insights of file theory may also be helpful in understanding the problems of fictionality. Orlando (2017) offered a specific version of fictional file theory to which she added later certain clarifications and corrections. In this paper I will first try to show that while Orlando's updated account of fiction is original and inspirational, it still suffers from some problems. Then I briefly delineate an alternative view, which is linguistic rather than mentalistic in its orientation. But, instead of arguing for the superiority of that view, I will conclude that the main challenge for the theory of fiction is to find an explanatory level where the mental and linguistic aspects of artworks can be treated simultaneously. | Keywords: *Mental Files, Concepts, Fiction, Fictional Names, Representation*

The literature on mental file theory seems to be uniform in one respect: every supporter of this theory agrees that files can and ought to play an explanatory role in understanding the fundamental mechanisms of thinking. More concretely, files are supposed to have an explanatory potential that can enlarge our knowledge about the generation and content of singular thoughts. One of the most often analyzed cases related to the mental phenomenon of singular thought is our knowledge of persons. Let us take Sigourney Weaver as an example. Presumably, even average movie fans know that Weaver is an American actress featuring in the *Alien* franchise and many other movies like *Gorillas in the Mist* and *Death and the Maiden*. They may also know that she was born in New York City and that she has a daughter named Charlotte. The leading idea of file theory is that thinkers collect and organize these various pieces of information into particular mental files. In their first encounter with this person, thinkers open a new file in their mind and label it with the name 'Weaver'. The WEAVER file then begins to be filled with mental

predicates such as ‘features in movies’ or ‘has a daughter’. It is important to stress, however, that the file has to be individuated relationally, not through the satisfaction of each of the collected mental predicates. One might believe, falsely, that Weaver won a Golden Globe Award in 1999 and thus include in her WEAVER file the predicate ‘won a Golden Globe Award’. Mental files may contain such kinds of misinformation and still be about a particular person. This is so because the individuation of files requires that thinkers stand in acquaintance relations to the targets of their files. Those who want to open a file about Weaver must already be connected to the person of Weaver through perception, testimony or some other epistemically rewarding relation.

The latter requirement is not absolutely general, however. The Weaver example merely illustrates that in *paradigmatic, everyday cases* the existence of mental files depends on the existence of their target objects. But it is not a necessary condition on the existence of files that thinkers stand in an epistemically rewarding relation to something in the mind-external domain. Imagined or expected epistemic relations to objects may also be sufficient conditions for opening files. Moreover, one can plausibly argue that files can be opened even in cases where there is no appropriate external object about which we could gather storable information.<sup>1</sup> Such relatively liberal conditions on file existence encouraged some theorists to apply the mental file framework to the domain of fiction.

Eleonora Orlando (2017) was among the firsts to argue for extending the theory of mental files to the treatment of fictional discourse. Even at first sight, this is not an easy enterprise. Thus, it is not surprising that some familiar hypotheses of the orthodox file theory must have been reinterpreted by Orlando. First, in order to explain how ordinary proper names can be used to express singular contents, she supplemented the mental file framework with a two-level semantics. The key point of this semantics is that declarative statements like ‘Weaver is an actress’ express two kinds of proposition simultaneously, a singular and a conceptual one. While the singular proposition is a Russellian proposition, which contains an object (Weaver) and a property (being an actress) as constituents, the conceptual proposition is built up from the WEAVER file and the descriptive concept ACTRESS. The conceptual proposition counts also as singular due to the fact that one of its building blocks, the WEAVER file, is directly related to the person of Weaver. The advantage of this two-level account of semantics in this context is that it is truth-conditional because it regards singular propositions as bearers of truth values, but it also illuminates how mental files get involved in the contents expressed by declarative statements.<sup>2</sup> Second, in order to show that this two-level semantics can be applied to fictional names, Orlando introduced the notion of oblique context into the mental file framework. In contrast

<sup>1</sup> An early articulation of this view is to be found in Recanati (2013, 2014). Note, however, that on Recanati’s view files without target objects may exist only as thought-vehicles that are unsuitable to generate contentful thoughts.

<sup>2</sup> Orlando’s two level semantics rests on the assumption that mental predicates can be conceived of as concepts. Note, however, that this is not a trivial assumption. For a critical position on this point, see Losada (2016).

to ordinary proper names, fictional names lack referents. While ‘Sigourney Weaver’ refers to a person, there is no individual or person to which ‘Sherlock Holmes’ refers. This generates a well-known interpretive problem since in its fiction-internal uses ‘Sherlock Holmes’ appears to refer to a detective. The notion of oblique context may help to solve this problem. For one can argue that fictional statements generate oblique contexts in which proper names do not refer to their customary referents but refer to their customary senses. And then, since mental files are to be conceived as senses of proper names, in its fiction-internal uses ‘Sherlock Holmes’ may be taken to refer to the HOLMES file. According to Orlando, the semantic effects of this kind of referential shift can also be observed in fiction-external uses of ‘Sherlock Holmes’, but the shifting mechanism is operative even in such cases where one interprets the Holmes narrative from a mixed internal/external perspective.

In my (2020) paper, I have criticized this view by arguing that it rests on an implausible understanding of referential shift. Some kinds of nominal expressions – typically, indexicals and demonstratives – shift their reference in a systematic way. The first-person pronoun ‘I’, for example, may refer to different persons in different contexts, depending on the identity of the person who uses that pronoun. Most semanticists think that the context-sensitivity of these expressions is encoded in their lexical profiles. It is implausible to think, however, that fictional names can shift their referents in that way. Purely fictional names like ‘Sherlock Holmes’ are introduced by their authors as empty names. Their semantic status is dependent on the circumstances under which they become part of a narrative discourse. If ‘Sherlock Holmes’ does not refer to anything at the occasion of its first occurrence in a narrative story, no context-sensitive lexical rule can modify the direction of this dependence relation. But, as mentioned, Orlando (2017) suggested that in oblique contexts fictional names change their semantic status and become referential expressions. The source of these changes was supposed to be a specific sort of authorial intention, which was called ‘simulative intention’. The problem with this explanation is that it seems intuitively equally implausible to think that authors have such intentions when they introduce names for their protagonists.

In a later paper in this journal, Orlando (2021a) responded to this critique in the following way. It is a mistake to interpret the phenomenon of referential shift as if it were based on a self-reflective attitude: simulative intentions are not controlled by other, second-order thoughts. Authors have indeed such intentions, that is, they intend to refer with their invented names to mental files, but they are not consciously aware of this intentional shifting mechanism. Fictional names like ‘Sherlock Holmes’ refer from their inception to mental files but the files themselves are not represented in the mind of the authors. As is well-known, ascriptions of intentional states to thinkers can be interpreted either transparently or opaquely. On the transparent interpretation, intentional states express relations between thinkers and objects, independently of how the objects in question are characterized. According to the opaque interpretation, intentional relations involve objects

that are characterized in a particular way. Orlando argued that ascribing a simulative intention to an author “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” (Orlando, 2021a, p. 83).

Now, I believe she was right in this regard. If ascription of intentional states to authors is interpreted in this way, it becomes more difficult to reject the hypothesis that fictional names refer to mental files. By using our *theoretical* vocabulary, we can explain adequately what happened when Conan Doyle introduced the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ into his narrative. By and large, the upshot will be that he opened a mental file, HOLMES, and referred with the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ to this file by performing a simulative intentional act. But we need not assume that Conan Doyle *himself* was acquainted with the theoretical notions of ‘mental file’ and ‘simulative intention’.

Orlando’s response to my critique shed also light on a further aspect of the debate about fictional narratives. As already mentioned, there is an interpretive problem concerning fictional names because our reading experiences suggest that the semantic profile of such names corresponds to the semantic profile of ordinary names: we tend to think, quite naturally, that ‘Sherlock Holmes’ and ‘Sigourney Weaver’ can equally be used to refer to persons. But obviously Holmes is a fictional character, not a person. So we are faced with a pressing ontological question: what kind of objects are fictional characters? Orlando’s fictional file theory offers a clear answer to this question. If we accept that fictional names refer to mental files, then there is no need to rely on auxiliary ontological assumptions: it can be said that the HOLMES file *is* the Holmes character.<sup>5</sup> And given that the HOLMES file is to be understood as a concept-type – grounded on tokens of concepts occurring in Conan Doyle’s mind –, the Holmes character may be identified, in the end, with a certain kind of abstract object.

Fictional realists who conceive of fictional characters as abstract objects may find this theory congenial. But they may also think that the success of the adaptation of mental file theory to fiction is still questionable. I want to mention briefly two possible difficulties concerning this project. The first is the so-called containment problem.<sup>4</sup> Mental files as concept-types are thought of as containing (mis)information in the form of mental predicates. Now, consider the following fiction-external occurrence of fictional names: ‘Holmes is smarter than Poirot’. What is the correct rendering of this sentence? If it is *Holmes is smarter than* \_\_, then the expressed information belongs to the HOLMES file. If it is \_\_ *smarter than Poirot*, then the expressed information belongs to the POIROT file. If the expressed information is the full proposition *that Holmes is smarter than Poirot*, then it must belong to both files. How could we decide between these possibilities? My impression is that mental file theory in its present form cannot provide a principled solution to this problem.

<sup>5</sup> On this theme, see also Orlando (2021b, pp. 129–130).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this problem, see Losada (2016) and Goodman and Gray (2020).

The second difficulty arises from synonymy relations between concepts. Let us assume that Conan Doyle introduced the name of his protagonist by tokening in his mind the concept *bachelor*. Thus the HOLMES file, the concept-type, must be seen as having been grounded (partly) on this token concept. Now, it is not unreasonable to think that the concepts *bachelor* and *unmarried man* have the same extension. A case like this would raise the following question: is it plausible to think that the HOLMES file has also been grounded on the concept *unmarried man*? Synonymy considerations would dictate a ‘yes’ answer. But the fact that Conan Doyle has not tokened the concept *unmarried man* in his mind would imply that the answer is ‘no’. It is difficult to see, again, how mental file theorists could provide a principled answer to this question.

Orlando argues persuasively that mental files (i.e. fictional characters) can also be understood as mental representations (Orlando, 2021a, p. 79; 2021b, p. 111). It is worth noting that there is an alternative view, which defines fictional characters not in terms of mental representation but in terms of linguistic representation.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, these rival views evaluate the ontological status of characters in a rather similar way. While some fictional realists contend that characters come into being as cultural artifacts, a specific type of abstract object, the mental file theory does not posit such peculiar objects.<sup>6</sup> The linguistic view rejects the enlargement of the ontology of the domain of fiction, too. The central idea is that we need not go beyond the analysis of abstract linguistic structures because the objects of our inquiry are given to us already at the level of these structures. According to this view, the primary source of our knowledge of fictional characters lies in our personal reading experiences. When we read Conan Doyle’s detective novel, we find in the text a great number of different kinds of representation pertaining to the properties of the main protagonist of the novel. The distinctive feature of these linguistic representations is that they have a non-relational semantic profile: Holmes-representations are non-binary in the sense that they lack extra-linguistic representata. These non-relational representations constitute an integrated abstract network in the novel. From an ontological point of view, one can say that this abstract, non-relational representational network *is* the Holmes character.

In favour of the latter view, it may be noted that within the linguistic framework the containment problem loses its force. The fiction-external sentence ‘Holmes is smarter than Poirot’ can be interpreted as making a comparison between two distinct representational networks. The truth value of the informational content expressed by this sentence will depend on the details of the applied method of comparison. Synonymy relations do not pose insurmountable problems for the linguistic framework, either. If Conan Doyle’s text represents Holmes (non-relationally) as being a bachelor, then this property is an integral part of the representational network. The fiction-external sentence ‘Holmes is an unmarried man’ can be interpreted as adding

<sup>5</sup> The idea can be traced back to Kamp (2015). For a more systematic elaboration of the representationalist stance, see Vecsey (2019).

<sup>6</sup> The artifactual view of fictional objects has been first articulated in Thomasson (1999).

a new property to the original (non-relational) representational network. Whether this addition is acceptable or not depends on how one evaluates the semantic relationship between the expressions ‘bachelor’ and ‘unmarried man’.

Although the linguistic framework can offer plausible solutions to the above-mentioned two problems, it would be hasty to conclude that it has a higher overall explanatory power than Orlando’s mental file theory. The explanatory cost-benefit relation between these views is, in a certain sense, symmetric. By applying the linguistic framework, one can elucidate the way in which authors of fictional texts construe representations from natural language expressions but the mental counterparts of these representations remain largely unexplained in this framework. In contrast, the mental file theory provides suitable means to analyse the structure and dynamics of mental representations of fictional objects but the linguistic aspects of these representations fall outside the scope of this theory. If this is a correct description of the present research situation, then it would be advantageous to find an appropriate explanatory level where the mental and linguistic aspects of fictional representations can be studied simultaneously.

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