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Empty Thoughts and Vicarious Thoughts in the Mental File Framework

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Mental files have a referential role—they serve to think about objects in the world—but they also have a meta-representational role: when 'indexed', they serve to represent how other subjects think about objects in the world. This additional, meta-representational function of files is invoked to shed light on the uses of empty singular terms in negative existentials and pseudo-singular attitude ascriptions.

Keywords: Mental files, acquaintance, empty names, singular thought, attitude ascriptions, negative existentials.

1. *The mental file framework*

An increasing number of philosophers use the mental file metaphor to illuminate singular thinking. Different people elaborate the metaphor differently, however.

On my own picture (Recanati 1993, 2006, 2010a, 2011, 2012), mental files are based on certain relations to objects in the environment; different types of file correspond to different types of relation. The relations in question—*acquaintance relations*—are epistemically rewarding in that they enable the subject to gain information from the object.[1] The role of the files is to store information about the objects we are acquainted with—information which our being acquainted with them makes available. So mental files are 'about objects': like singular terms in the language, they refer, or are supposed to refer. What they refer to is not determined by properties which the subject takes the referent to have (i.e. by information—or misinformation—*in* the file), but through

[1] The paradigm is, of course, perceptual acquaintance, but the notion of acquaintance can be generalized "in virtue of the analogy between relations of perceptual acquaintance and other, more tenuous, relations of epistemic rapport" (Lewis 1999: 380–81). The generalized notion of acquaintance covers community-mediated testimonial relations to objects mentioned to us in conversation, etc.

relations (of the subject, or of the file itself construed as a mental particular) to various entities in the environment in which the file fulfils its function. The file corresponds to an information channel, and the reference is the object from which the information derives, whether that information is genuine information or misinformation.

By deploying the file (or its 'address' or 'label') in thought, the subject can think about the object in virtue of standing in the relevant relation to it. What about singular terms in language? They occur in sentences, and sentences express (and elicit) thoughts. From the interpreter's point of view, to understand a sentence is to entertain a thought. If the sentence contains a singular term referring to an object *a*, thinking the relevant thought involves deploying a file also referring to *a*. The file in question is a constituent of the thought, namely what the singular term contributes to it. In other words: the file is the *sense* of the singular term.

In Frege's framework, singular terms have, in addition to their referent, a sense in virtue of which they present the referent in a certain way. Senses obey what Schiffer calls 'Frege's constraint' (Schiffer 1978: 180): if a rational subject can think of some object *a* both that it is *F* and that it is not *F*, that means that there are two distinct modes of presentation under which the subject thinks of *a*. Sense is the level at which the subject's rationality can be assessed, and this entails that senses are transparent to the thinker (Dummett 1978: 131, Boghossian 1994).[2]

Frege also used senses to account for non-trivial identity statements such as 'Cicero is Tully'. The statement is informative because the two terms flanking the identity signs have different senses. But what are the senses in question? As Fine puts it,

> The main problem with the Fregean position (…) is to say, in particular cases, what the difference in the meaning or sense of the names might plausibly be taken to be. Although there appear to be good theoretical reasons for thinking that there *must* be a difference, it seems hard to say in particular cases what it is. For as Kripke (1980) has pointed out, it seems possible for a speaker, or for speakers, to associate the same beliefs or information with two names, such as "Cicero" and "Tully." And if the information or beliefs are the same, then how can the sense be different? (Fine 2007: 35)

To address this problem, we must realize that there are two options for modes of presentation. They may be descriptive, in which case the object is thought of as the possessor of a certain identifying property. (This is Frege's own construal of senses.) But there are also nondescriptive senses or modes of presentation (Evans 1982), and these, I claim, are mental files. Even though files *contain* information (or misinformation), what plays the role of sense is not the information in the file, but the file itself.[3] If there are two distinct files, one associated with 'Cicero'

[2] This is in contrast to referents, which always present themselves under 'guises' and give rise to all sorts of confusion (two objects mistaken for one, or one for two).

[3] In *Reference and the Rational Mind*, Taylor repeatedly criticizes the authors like myself who take mental files to be concepts, on the grounds that this conflates

and the other with 'Tully', then there are two distinct senses, *even if the information in the two files is the same* ('a Roman orator'). On this view, to say that the two terms flanking the identity sign have different senses is to say that they are associated with two distinct files. When an identity is discovered, the files get *linked*, so that information can flow freely between them. The files may eventually get *merged*, after some time. Merging is a complex process: an 'inclusive file' is created, into which all (consistent) information from the initial files is transferred; then the initial files are deleted. But the initial files need not be deleted. In *partial merging*, the initial files are retained after an inclusive file has been created. (See example (4) below for an instance of partial merging.)

Two terms that are associated with the same file have the same sense, and this allows a rational subject to 'trade upon identity' (Campbell 1987, 1994, 2002). Thus from the two-sentence discourse

(1) John met Cicero$_i$ the other day. The bastard$_i$ walked away.

we can infer 'there is an *x* such that John met *x* the other day and *x* walked away', simply because the two terms 'Cicero' and 'the bastard' are associated with the same file (as the subscripts indicate). Two terms that are associated with the same file are coreferential *de jure:* 'anyone who raises the question of whether the[ir] reference [i]s the same would thereby betray his lack of understanding' (Fine 2007: 40). In contrast, one may fully understand the identity statement 'Cicero is Tully', and still wonder whether it is true (i.e. whether the two terms 'Cicero' and 'Tully' are actually coreferential). Full understanding requires grasping the sense of the terms and realizing that the two terms are associated with the same file if they are. (In the case of 'Cicero' and 'Tully', the senses are different and the two terms are only *de facto* coreferential.)

2. *Beyond acquaintance*

Mental files, I said, are characterized by their function: to store information gained in virtue of acquaintance relations to the reference of the file. If this is right, and if, as I also said, singular thinking proceeds

concepts and conceptions (Taylor 2003: 75–82, 181–84; see Woodfield 1991 for a similar worry). Indeed, as defined by Taylor, conceptions seem to be nothing but mental files: 'A conception… is a kind of mental particular, a labeled, perhaps highly structured, and updateable database of information about the extension of an associated concept. For example, each thinker who can deploy the concept <cat> in thought episodes is likely to have stored in his head a database of information (and misinformation) about cats' (Taylor 2003: 181). Taylor's main objection to equating concepts and conceptions is that this entails that 'what concepts a cognizer has supervenes, more or less, on what beliefs the thinker has' (Taylor 2003: 77). But I deny that this unwelcome consequence holds if concepts are equated to *mental files*. The problem with Taylor's notion of a 'conception' is that, even though he describes a conception as a mental particular, it seems to correspond to the *content* of a mental file (at a time) rather than to the file itself. I draw a sharp distinction between the two things—the file itself, and its content.

through the deployment of a mental file, then acquaintance is involved in the very concept of a singular thought. But this does not mean that one can think a singular thought only if one is acquainted with the referent. That singular thinking involves mental files, whose role is to store information gained through acquaintance relations to the reference, is compatible with the view that one can think a singular thought in the absence of acquaintance.

What, then, are the necessary conditions for thinking a singular thought? To answer that question, we need to draw a crucial distinction (familiar in the neo-Fregean literature) between thought-vehicle and thought-content, and a corresponding distinction between the conditions necessary for tokening a singular thought-vehicle and the conditions necessary for successfully thinking a singular thought-content.

To think a singular thought in the sense of vehicle, one must activate a mental file. The role of a mental file is to store information gained through acquaintance with the referent, but such files can be opened in the absence of acquaintance. The most typical reason for so doing (in the absence of actual acquaintance) is that we *expect* that future acquaintance with the referent will enable us to gain information from it, information which will go into the file. Thus the name 'Jack the Ripper' was introduced to refer to whoever committed certain murders, and 'Neptune' was introduced to refer to whatever planet causes certain perturbations in the orbit of Uranus. Even though the referent of such 'descriptive names' is known only by description, the subject nevertheless opens a file for it because he anticipates that he will soon be acquainted with it and needs a place to store information about it (Recanati 1993: 180).

In the absence of actual acquaintance, is expected acquaintance *necessary* to open a mental file? I do not think so. Imagined acquaintance, just as expected acquaintance, justifies opening a file and tokening a singular term in thought.[4] Moreover, one may open a mental file to do other things than what it is the normal function of mental files to do—things that have nothing to do with acquaintance (Jeshion 2010). For example, thinking about the average mid-twentieth century American, I may give him a name and predicate things of him.[5] When one uses a name in such a way, there is no doubt that the name has a function, distinct from (though parasitic on) the normal function of names. So I think one should definitely be 'liberal' with regard to the generation of mental files.[6] The natural and primary function of mental files is to store information, so the typical reason for opening a mental file is that one expects to get information, but even if one has no such expectation, one may have other reasons for thinking through a singular vehicle.

[4] Jeshion gives the example of 'a child's imaginary friend' (Jeshion 2010: 136).

[5] This is related to the phenomenon of 'arbitrary reference' discussed in Breckenridge and Magidor (2012).

[6] 'Liberalism' is characterized by Hawthorne and Manley (2012) as the view that there is no acquaintance constraint on singular thought.

Besides the conditions on the *generation* of mental files, however, we must follow Evans in making room also for conditions on their *success*. Opening a mental file is sufficient to entertain a singular thought only in the sense of thought-*vehicle*. It is not sufficient to entertain a singular thought in the sense of thought-*content*. Why is that so? Because the content we're talking about is truth-conditional content. A 'successful' singular thought is a thought that has singular truth-conditions, that is, a thought such that there is an *x* such that the thought is true (with respect to an arbitrary possible world) iff…*x*… The singular content of such a thought is object-dependent: there is no such content if there is no object to which the speaker refers by deploying the relevant mental file. This makes all the difference between the case of Neptune and the case of Vulcan. In both cases Leverrier, anticipating the discovery of the planet whose existence he (seemingly) had been able to infer, opened a mental file for it; but Leverrier's expectation was correct in the first case, incorrect in the second. So a singular term was tokened when Leverrier thought 'The discovery of Vulcan will make me famous', but no singular thought content was thereby entertained, because there is no object *x* such that Leverrier's thought is true just in case that object has the relevant property.

There are all sorts of debates on what exactly the conditions are for thinking singular contents. In Recanati (2010a) I argued that to think a singular thought content one must at least expect acquaintance with the putative referent and be right in one's expectation. For my present purposes, however, the only thing that matters is that tokening a singular vehicle is not sufficient for thinking a singular thought content: *some* further conditions have to be met, which include the existence of an object to which, at some time or other, the thinker is suitably related in an epistemically rewarding manner. So Leverrier's thought about Vulcan is the paradigm case of an *unsuccessful* tokening of a singular vehicle.

Familiar though it is, the view I have just expounded raises a major difficulty. It entails that Leverrier failed to express a singular content when he said or thought 'the discovery of Vulcan will make me famous', the reason for this being that 'Vulcan' is an empty singular term. But there are well-known cases in which tokening an empty singular term does not prevent one from expressing a truth-evaluable content. Thus if I say or think

(2) Leverrier thought that the discovery of Vulcan would make him famous

I say something true (assuming Leverrier actually thought 'the discovery of Vulcan will make me famous'): I successfully use the empty name in order to ascribe to Leverrier what I called a 'pseudo-singular belief' (Recanati 1998: 557, 2000: 226).[7] How can that be? The problem is related to the problem of 'negative existentials' like

[7] To entertain a pseudo-singular belief is to have a singular mental sentence tokened in one's belief box, but one that fails to express any proposition. If I say or think 'My son believes that Santa Claus will come tonight', it seems that I successfully use the empty name 'Santa Claus' to ascribe to my son a pseudo-singular belief.

(3) Vulcan does not exist.

Such a statement also says something true, even though an empty singular term is tokened. What is the function of empty names in such contexts? How, in the mental-file framework, can we account for such cases?

To answer these questions, we need to appeal to the idea of a *derived function* for mental files (Recanati 2010a: 177–81). Mental files are primarily singular terms in the language of thought: they serve to think about objects in the world. But, I claim, they have a derived, metarepresentational function: they (also) serve to represent how *other subjects* think about objects in the world. This additional, metarepresentational function of files accounts for all the 'intentional' uses of empty singular terms, illustrated by (inter alia) negative existentials and pseudo-singular attitude ascriptions. Or so I want to argue.

3. *Indexed files*

To account for the metarepresentational use of files, we need the notion of an *indexed file*. An indexed file is a file that stands, in the subject's mind, for another subject's file about an object. An indexed file consists of a file and an index, where the index refers to the other subject whose own file the indexed file stands for or simulates. Thus an indexed file $<f, S_2>$ in S_1's mind stands for the file *f* which S_2 putatively uses in thinking about some entity. So there are two types of file in S_1's mind: regular files which S_1 uses to think about objects in his or her environment, and indexed files which s/he uses vicariously to represent how other subjects (e.g. S_2) think about objects in their environment.[8]

As an example, consider the following case of attitude ascription, in which the ascribee (the person to whom the attitude is ascribed) is the subject himself at an earlier stage of his doxastic development:

(4) I was deliberating whether to investigate both Hesperus and Phosphorus; but when I got evidence of their true identity, I immediately sent probes there.

In this example, which I adapt from one by Angel Pinillos (2011), three files are involved. The 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' files are the files which (before learning the identity—when he was deliberating whether to investigate both Hesperus and Phosphorus or only one of them) the confused subject used to deploy in thinking about Venus. These files are still available after learning the identity, but their status has changed: their role is now to enable the subject to represent how he thought of Venus previously. Learning the identity caused the subject to open an inclusive file for Venus and to transfer information from the 'Hesperus' and the 'Phosphorus' files into it. It is this inclusive file

[8] The file component of an indexed file may itself be an indexed file. Thus S_1 may think about S_2's way of thinking of S_3's way of thinking of some entity, and to that effect may entertain the indexed file $<<f, S_3>, S_2>$.

which, arguably, gives the sense of the adverb 'there', at the end of the sentence. But instead of deleting the initial files and completing the second step of the merge operation, the subject has retained the initial files (linked together, and linked also to the inclusive file), and uses them vicariously to represent how, when confused, he used to think of Venus. In other words, the 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' files, as used by the speaker in (4), are indexed to his or her earlier self, while the inclusive 'Venus' file associated with 'there' at the end of the sentence is a regular file.

Given the existence of two types of files in the subject's mind (regular files and indexed files), and the mechanism of linking that operates between files, there are two possibilities for a given indexed file. Either the indexed file, which represents some other subject's way of thinking about some entity, is linked to some regular file in the subject's mind referring to the same entity (and corresponding to the subject's own way of thinking of that entity); or it isn't. If it isn't, the subject's only access to the entity in question is via the filing system of other subjects. For example, S_1 may not believe in witches, but may still ascribe to S_2 thoughts about a certain witch which S_2 thinks has blighted his mare (Geach 1967; Edelberg 1992). In this case S_1 does not refer to the witch in the full-blown sense of the term; he does not express a genuine singular thought about the witch, but only a vicarious singular thought—a singular thought by proxy, as it were. This is the free-wheeling, or unloaded, use of indexed files, illustrated by e.g. 'My son believes that Santa Claus is coming tonight'.

The other possibility for an indexed file is to be linked to a regular file in the subject's mind. In such a case the subject has two ways of thinking of the object: a way of thinking of his own (a regular file) and a vicarious way of thinking (the indexed file). If the subject uses the indexed file to think about the object, that use is 'loaded' and has existential import, in contrast to the free-wheeling use. Even though the subject refers to the object through some other subject's file about it, he takes that object to exist since he himself has a regular file about it. In this way a singular thought is genuinely expressed. Example (4) is a case in point: the speaker uses two vicarious files indexed to his earlier self, namely a Hesperus file and a Phosophorus file, both of which are linked to his current Venus file and therefore carry ontological commitment.[9]

[9] There is an important difference between linking as it operates between regular files (horizontal linking), and linking as it operates between regular files and indexed files, or between indexed files of different degrees of embedding (vertical linking). Linking between regular files typically makes it possible for information to flow freely between the linked files. But indexed files are used to stand for some other subject's body of information about some object, and that function could not be served if, through linking, the indexed file was contaminated by the subject's own information about that object. Information can flow only after undergoing upward or downward conversion (for example, a predicate λxGx in an indexed file $<f, S_2>$

4. *Simulation and transparency*

In conclusion, I'd like to emphasize an important characteristic of indexed files. To represent the file deployed by the person to whom a singular attitude is ascribed, we deploy a similar file, indexed to that person. So iconic files have an *iconic* dimension. Or perhaps we should say that they are a *simulative* device: by deploying a mental file just like the file in the mind of the indexed person, one simulates the mental state one is attempting to describe; one puts oneself in the other person's shoes (or frame of mind), by looking at things her way.

One way of capturing the iconic/simulative dimension of indexed files would be to treat them as quotational devices. In quotation, one refers to a linguistic expression by actually using it or (more cautiously) displaying it. Similarly, there is a sense in which an indexed file stands for itself, that is, for the file in the mind of the person one is simulating by deploying that very file.

The analogy with quotation is tricky, however. Standardly, quotations are opaque: the expression in quotes refers to itself, rather than to its ordinary referent. This, at least, is true of the central class of quotations which I dubbed closed quotations (Recanati 2001, 2010b: chapter 7). Indexed files behave differently. While indexed, the file *still refers to its ordinary referent,* that is, it still refers to the object the simulated file is about. In standard instances of opaque attitude attribution, a singular term in the embedded clause evokes a file in the ascribee's mind and *refers to the referent of that file* (not to the file itself). This is, as Quine would put it, a mixture of use and mention. Indexed files can still be treated as a quotational device, but the type of quotation at issue has to be open quotation, not closed quotation. Open quotations have an echoic character but, typically, the quoted words keep their ordinary meaning and reference while evoking or echoing the words of some other person or persons (Recanati 2008, 2010b: chapter 8).

The following example (from Recanati 1987) illustrates open quotation and can easily be analysed in terms of indexed files:

(5) Hey, 'your sister' is coming over.

Here the description 'your sister' refers to Ann, who is *not* the addressee's sister, but is thought to be so by James, a third party who the speaker is ironically echoing. The reference is the reference of the relevant file (the file which contains the information: 'is the addressee's sister'), and in this case the relevant file is a file in some other subject's mind. So the file the speaker uses to refer to Ann is a file indexed to James. The indexed file is linked to the speaker's own file about Ann (or to a public file about her shared by the speaker and her addressee).

can be transferred into the subject's regular file to which it is vertically linked only after upward conversion into $\lambda x\ S_2$ *believes that x is G*). So vertical linking between regular files and indexed files (or between indexed files with different degrees of embedding) preserves the informational encapsulation of files, which standard (horizontal) linking typically has the effect of suppressing.

Since that file about Ann does not contain the information 'addressee's sister', it is clear that in this example the linguistic materials constrain the indexed file, rather than the regular file through which the speaker thinks of the referent.

What is interesting about (5) is that it is not globally metarepresentational. (5) is not about anybody's attitudes or representations: it ascribes to Ann the property of coming over. (5) does not even mention James, the person whose way of thinking is being echoed. The metarepresentational element that is undoubtedly present is to be found at the level of sense rather than the level of reference. The sense of the description is an indexed file, and an indexed file is a file that is tacitly ascribed to some other subject; but the ascription of the file to James remains external to the utterance's truth-conditional content.[10]

What I have said about the transparency of indexed files, i.e. the fact that indexing preserves ordinary reference, only applies to those indexed files that are loaded and ontologically commit the speaker/thinker. Unloaded indexed files are special: they do not refer to anything—the only reference there is is pretend or simulated reference. As a result, there are only two options for an utterance containing a singular term associated with a free-wheeling indexed file. First option: the utterance does not express a genuine thought, but only a 'mock thought', as Frege puts it (1979: 30). If I say to my children: 'Santa Claus is coming tonight', I do not express a genuine singular thought. I only pretend to refer to Santa Claus, and to predicate something of him. (The same thing is arguably true if, echoing my children, I tell my wife: 'Santa Claus is coming tonight'. Here the file associated with 'Santa Claus' is indexed to Santa-Claus believers and unloaded, so the whole speech act has to be seen as a form of pretence.) Second option: the utterance expresses a thought that is globally metarepresentational and opaque—it is about someone's, e.g. my children's, representations, *rather than* about what these representations are about. This corresponds to pseudo-singular belief ascriptions. I think negative (and positive) existentials too are meta-representational, but that is one of the issues I must leave for another occasion.[11]

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[10] The possible occurrence of indexed files in non-metarepresentational contexts accounts for substitutivity failures in simple sentences, as in Saul-type examples (Saul 1997).

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