

Mental Files are Real

Philosophers of language have traditionally invoked talk of 'mental files' to explain various linguistic phenomena relating to singular thought and reference, including informative identity statements (Strawson, 1974), continued belief (Perry, 1980), and the interpretation of definite descriptions (Heim, 1983; Szabo, 2000). More recently, Recanati (2012) put forth an explicit theory of mental files as non-descriptive Fregean senses (see also Murez and Recanati, 2016). But what exactly are mental files; are files real mental particulars or mere expository metaphors? Goodman and Gray (2022) defend an anti-realist interpretation of file-theory by arguing that files are a metaphor for 'semantic coordination', a relational feature of a subject's attitude state. Contrarily, Clarke (2022) argues that files are real mental particulars, acting as the causal basis of identity presupposing dispositions (IPDs). Here, I defend a revised version of Recanati's file theory by expanding on Clarke's defense of realism about files. Ultimately, I argue that commitment to the existence of appropriately characterized file-like mental particulars is justified by the role they play in explaining the existence and rational permissibility of subjects' dispositions to perform inferences that 'trade on identity'.

Part one summarizes the puzzles motivating theorists to posit mental files, ending with a description of the core commitments of contemporary file theory as characterized by Recanati (2012). Part two examines how Goodman and Gray (G&G) (2022) avoid standard objections to contemporary file theory by interpreting files as expository metaphors. Part three contains my Clarke-inspired defense of files as real mental particulars that provide the causal basis for dispositions to perform inferences that trade on identity.

Part One: Introduction to File Theory

1.1 Motivating File Theory

File-talk originated from an attempt to provide a non-descriptivist account of Frege's senses (1948). Senses provide a compelling explanation of the informative value of identity statements. However, if senses are descriptions, then identity statements containing senses express analytic and apriori truths, a conclusion which so called 'externalists' including Kripke (1980), Kaplan (1989) and Millikan (2000) convincingly reject. Hence, files were introduced as

non-descriptive senses, explaining the informative value of identity statements whilst accounting for externalist intuitions.

Peter Strawson (1974)—an early advocate of file-talk—asks us to imagine a man as an information storing machine containing a set of cards (i.e. files), each corresponding to a cluster of knowledge used to identify an object:

on receipt of an identity-statement invoking two such clusters, [...] two appropriate cards [files] are withdrawn and a new card is prepared, bearing both the names of which one heads one of the original cards and one the other, and incorporating the sum of the information contained in the original cards; the single new card is returned to stock and the original cards are thrown away (pg. 46).

On this metaphor, Files are non-descriptive because their referents are determined not by some description encoded as information they contain, but by prior identifying knowledge. Identity statements are informative when the terms they relate invoke two separate files or clusters of information (i.e. modes of presentation), instructing the hearer to create a new file containing the sum of information stored in the original pair.

Bach (1987) builds on Strawson's theory of files by giving a more explicit explanation of how files account for the informative value of identity statements. Bach reframes the problem in terms of the rationality of inferences that 'trade on identity', a paradigmatic instance of which is represented by the following argument form:

- a. x_1 is F
- b. x_2 is F
- c. Therefore, $\exists x([x \text{ is F}] \ \& \ [G \text{ is F}])$

For an inference of this form to be rational, the individual performing it must possess—in addition to beliefs *a* and *b*—an implicit identity belief that ' x_1 is x_2 '. But the suggestion that trading on identity necessarily involves a set of discrete identity beliefs is psychologically implausible, leading to an infinite regress where each identity belief is linked to the inference by the addition of another (Campbell, 1987). Addressing this issue, Bach's (1987) proposal is that identity beliefs are, as Goodman (2024) puts it, 'instantiated by facts about cofiling'. On this view, it is rational to trade on identity only if that identity is encoded by the cofiling—and hence, 'inferential integration'—of multiple pieces of information. Identity statements are informative when they instruct the hearer to integrate and encode the coreference of two pieces of

information by storing them in a single file, and uninformative when they invoke information that is already inferentially integrated in a single file.

1.2 Contemporary File Theory

Recently, Recanati (2012) introduced what I call 'contemporary file theory', capturing the core theoretical commitments of traditional file theorists like Strawson and Bach. Most relevant to the present discussion are the following commitments:

- (1) Mental files 'contain' predicates. The mental predicates stored in a file correspond to beliefs the subject has about the referent of that file. And the subject can rationally trade on the identity of any information contained (and hence, 'inferentially integrated') in a single file, but not on information that is stored in separate files.
- (2) Mental files are singular concepts (i.e. syntactic/vehicular constituents of singular thoughts and propositional attitudes). For instance, a thought that Chicago is a large city is partially constituted by deployment of a file that refers to Chicago.
- (3) The referent of any given mental file is the object with which it stands in an epistemically rewarding (ER) relation. Files store information gained in virtue of their corresponding ER relations and act as non-descriptive representations because their referents are not whichever objects happen to be picked out by the predicates they contain, but rather the objects with which they stand in ER relations.
- (4) Mental files are individuated by their corresponding ER relations, meaning that for each file there corresponds a single unique ER relation.

In what follows, I take this theory as my starting point, explaining how it must be adapted in light of the objections considered below.

Part Two: Objections and Metaphorical Files

2.1 Objections to Contemporary File Theory

Below, I describe two of the strongest objections to the core commitments of contemporary file theory.

2.1.1 Reciprocal Containment Objection

Commitment (1) explains beliefs in terms of the containment of mental predicates in files. Commitment (2), on the other hand, states that beliefs and other attitudes are partially constituted by files. So, a belief that *a* is *F* is realized by a mental predicate *F* being stored in a file about *a*. But since files are singular concepts (or non-descriptive Fregean senses), the *a*-file is a constituent of the belief that *a* is *F*. Hence, as Woodfield (1991) remarks, file-theory implies

that "concepts [i.e. files] are parts of beliefs, yet beliefs are parts of concepts," leading to a 'mereological paradox'.

Relatedly, Fodor (2008) worries that "you don't think everything you believe about John when you think [a thought about John]." If files are partially constituted by the subject's beliefs about their referents (commitment 1) and singular thoughts are partially constituted by files (commitment 2), then singular thoughts are partially constituted by all the subject's beliefs about their objects. Hence, file-theory seems to wrongly predict that having a singular thought involves thinking about everything one believes about the object of that thought.

To address these worries, file-theorists must either show that the reciprocal containment objection arises from a faulty interpretation of file-theory or abandon commitments (1) or (2).

2.1.2 *Referential Continuity Objection*

Commitment (3) explains that epistemically rewarding (ER) relations determine the referents of their corresponding files. Relatedly, commitment (4) claims that for each file there corresponds a single unique ER relation. ER relations are simply relations to particular objects that allow subjects to gather information about those objects; the paradigmatic examples being perceptual relations and communicative chains. The problem of referential continuity results from commitment (4), which makes incorrect predictions about the inferential integration of beliefs in cases where the ER relation the subject bears to an object changes.

Taking an example from G&G (2022), suppose I bear an ER perceptual relation to some object x between time t_1 and t_3 . At t_1 , I judge x to have a yellow bill, and at t_2 to have a graduated tail, rationally concluding at t_3 that x is a yellow-billed cuckoo. At t_4 , I go home and my perceptual relation to the bird ceases. But at t_5 , I return to the field and notice the same bird again by employing a recognitional capacity, judging at t_6 that it is healthy, and hence rationally concluding at t_7 that some yellow-billed cuckoo is healthy. Here, contrary to what file-theory predicts (commitment 1), the subject rationally trades on the identity of information that seems to be distributed across multiple types of files--one file based on a perception (t_1 - t_3), and another based on recognition (t_5 - t_7).

Among the file-theorist's immediate potential responses are the following: abandon or reinterpret commitment (4) by adopting an alternative account of file individuation or deny that

the subject's ER relation between t_1 - t_3 is distinct from their ER relation between t_5 - t_7 . Note that the latter option fails to avoid the objection if there is some structurally analogous case (e.g., the subject trades on the identity of information gathered across perceptual and communicative relations).

2.2 Goodman & Gray's Metaphorical Files

G&G argue that the 'file' of contemporary file theory is not a real mental particular, but rather a metaphor for semantic coordination, claiming that the commitments of file theory are not subject to the above objections.

The crux of G&G's argument is the claim that the explanandum of file theory is a rational status, not a psychological process. Hence, the phrase 'can rationally trade on identity' of commitment (1) is interpreted not as referring to a psychological ability, but rather, a rational permission. Since the rational permissibility of inferences that trade on identity is explained by 'coordination'—a relational representational feature of a subject's attitude state that G&G take file-theorists to be committed to—file-theorists needn't additionally appeal to file-like mental particulars. Important to G&G are not the details of coordination (for which they refer to Fine (2007)), but rather that coordination is an irreducibly relational feature and so cannot be grounded in file-containment, which they claim is an intrinsic feature of object-representations.

2.2.1 Addressing the Reciprocal Containment Objection

G&G argue that commitments (1) and (2) do not lead to a mereological paradox because file-containment is just a metaphor for coordination. Commitment (1) essentially states that 'a subject can trade on the identity of two object-representations iff both are stored in a single file'. This means that 'the subject is rationally permitted to trade on the identity of two object representations iff both representations bear a coordination relation to each other'. Hence, G&G write,

On our approach the puzzle evaporates: the representational features of a belief about a are partly constituted by the coordination between that representation of a and other representations of a . But there is nothing that resembles reciprocal containment.

The resulting view is that beliefs are understood not as the containment of predicates in files, but rather as individual object representations that sometimes bear a representational relation of coordination to one another.

2.2.2 Addressing the Referential Continuity Objection

Recall that this objection challenges the role ER relations are claimed (by commitment 4) to play in individuating files. Reinterpreted in G&G's framework, the objection states that there are counterexamples to the claim that it is irrational to trade on the identity of object-representations formed in virtue of multiple different ER relations.

G&G's response is to reject commitment (4), clarifying that the role of ER relations is not to individuate files (since files don't exist), but rather to ground reference (commitment 3) and enter into a meta-semantic account of how object-representations come to be coordinated.

Ultimately, G&G defend the following meta-semantic account of coordination:

- a and b are coordinated only if a and b stand in TIF and ERF, where:
- TIF states that if an occasion for trading on the identity of a and b arises, the subject will, *ceteris paribus*, trade on their identity.
- And ERF states that there exists some ER relation R such that if object-representation c is a deliverance of R , then *ceteris paribus*, c stands in TIF to a and b
- (G&G, pg. 25-27)

Crucially, this view is consistent with the claim that separate representations can be coordinated even if they were acquired through different ER relations. All this account requires, G&G clarify, is that "the way that [a and b] occupy TIF is dispositionally connected to an ER relation" (pg. 28). Indeed, because ERF simply states that coordination between a and b implies there is *some* ER relation whose deliverances stand in TIF with a and b , it can be rational for the subject to trade on the identity of object representations even when they result from *different* ER relations.

Part Three: Files are Real Mental Particulars

3.1 Files as the Causal Basis of Identity-Presupposing Dispositions

Following Clarke (2022), I hold that G&G's anti-realist interpretation of file-theory fails to account for the causal basis of a thinker's identity-presupposing-dispositions (IPDs). Positing files as mental particulars provides a strong explanation for the existence and rational permissibility of IPDs, rendering an appeal to semantic coordination redundant. I briefly motivate this view below, explaining how it avoids the objections raised above. I expand upon Clarke's view by arguing that it's possible to avoid the reciprocal containment objection without rejecting the role of files as singular concepts.

Clarke's main contention with G&G's view is that it assumes that the explanandum of file-theory is the rational permissibility of dispositions to perform inferences that trade on identity (IPDs). Indeed, G&G (2022) explicitly write, "the explanandum of MFT-S [file-theory] is a rational status, not a psychological process" (pg. 12). But whether some IPD is rationally permissible is a pointless question if the thinker doesn't possess that IPD. To ask whether some IPD is permissible despite the thinker failing to possess it is to ask whether it would be permissible were they to possess it. So questions about the existence and causal basis of IPDs are, in an important sense, prior to questions about their permissibility.

Mental file theory offers a plausible account of the causal basis of IPDs at a certain level of functional description of the cognitive system. The claim is that there exists some mechanism that IPDs are caused by which has the functional profile of something with file-structure--consisting of an object, a collection of properties that object possesses, and some appropriate association between them. Clarke maintains that once this theory is in place, semantic coordination is redundant.

3.1.1 Addressing the Referential Continuity Objection

Like G&G, Clarke avoids the referential continuity objection by rejecting commitment (4); files are not individuated by their corresponding ER relations. Unlike G&G (who reject the existence of files altogether), Clarke offers a partial account of how files are individuated, arguing that we should appeal to what Lawlor (2001) calls 'monitoring' (i.e. 'file maintenance dispositions'). The basic idea is that IPDs are reliable, and hence rationally permissible, because files are maintained by some cognitive mechanism that has evolved to help thinker's track objects and thereby pursue complex plans, avoid bad situations, and maintain good ones.

Furthermore, citing Millikan (2000), Clarke writes that,

Identity is tracked through the exploitation of multiple sources of information, and any adequate way of tracking an object will necessarily involve at least the potential use of a range of methods. The fact that the object is part of a complex causal network distributed in time and space, and that the thinker is also so situated, makes this inevitable.

Commitment (4) leads to the referential continuity objection because it contradicts this basic reality, stating that each object is identified via a single simple ER relation.

3.1.2 Addressing the Reciprocal Containment Objection

Recall that this objection results from a conflict between commitments (1) and (2) of contemporary file-theory. Hence, Clarke avoids the objection by rejecting commitment (2), which states that files act as singular concepts (i.e. constituents of singular thoughts). Files are "not concepts" and contribute to a thinker's mental state "purely by causally underwriting the sort of transitions the paradigm of which is conjoin-and-generalize, with semantically evaluable end states." The result is that mental files are "in no sense constituted by propositional attitudes, nor are the thinker's dispositions constitutive of predicates being associated with files" (pg. 7).

But why can't files act both as the causal basis of IPDs and as singular concepts? I contend that Clarke's rejection of files as singular concepts is unnecessary if files are sharply distinguished from their informational contents. Following Crimmins (1992), Recanati (2012) avoids the objection by making this move, writing "the file's deployment in thought gives access to the file's content but to deploy the file in thought is not the same thing as accessing all of its content" (pg. 39). If files are kept separate from the information they contain, then one does not have to access all that information when they use the file in thought.

Hence, files can both causally underwrite mental transitions that trade on identity, and act as constituents of singular thoughts. The reason files were thought to face the reciprocal containment objection is that they were conflated with conceptions, which are constituted by beliefs and other propositional attitudes. But files are not constituted by attitudes; rather, files partially constitute attitudes, representing objects by both standing for them in thought, and by 'licensing/disposing' inferences that preserve co-reference.

3.2 Conclusion

I motivated file-talk in part one, summarizing G&G's defense of anti-realism about file-talk in part two. In part three, I presented my Clarke-inspired defense of files as real mental particulars, arguing that this view avoids the objections G&G's anti-realist file theory was intended to solve and has greater explanatory power, accounting for the existence and permissibility of IPDs at a psychological level. Given the advantages and explanatory power of this view, I conclude that commitment to files as real mental particulars is justified.

References

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