

# Indexed Mental Files and Names in Fiction

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## Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the theory of mental files can provide a unitary cognitive account of how names and singular terms work in fiction. I will suggest that the crucial notion we need is not the one of regular file, i.e., a file whose function is to accumulate information that we take to be about a single object of the outside world, but the notion of indexed file, i.e., a file that stands, in the subject's mind, for another subject's file about an object. When we read a novel containing the name of an individual, we acquire (fictional) information about that individual and we store those pieces of information into an indexed file. If the name also refers to a real individual outside the context of fiction, the indexed file is linked with the pre-existing regular file that we have about such individual. Otherwise, the indexed file is linked to a regular file referring to an abstract object, namely the fictional entity itself.

## Keywords

François Recanati, mental files, indexed files, empty names, fictional characters

## 1 Real names in fiction

Following Evans (1982: 358), we can distinguish between two kinds of game of make-believe: *existentially conservative games*, in which one pretends that certain really existing individuals possess such and such properties, and *existentially creative games*, in which one pretends that there are certain individuals possessing such and such properties<sup>1</sup>. As Voltolini observes:

<sup>1</sup> A similar idea can be found in Walton's distinction between prop-oriented

This is the intuition that fictional works concern not only fictional but also *concrete* individuals, especially actually existing ones. Or, in order for the time being to neutralize any commitment to fictional works, it seems intuitively clear that, over and above existentially creative games, storytelling processes also consist of existentially conservative games in which one makes believe of concrete individuals that they possess certain properties. (Voltolini 2006: 117–8)<sup>2</sup>

Some philosophers think that fictional context suspends reference to real individuals, so that, when real names occur in fictions, they do not refer to anything or they refer to fictional surrogates somehow correlated with their real counterparts<sup>3</sup>. However, a clarification is needed: the so-called “no-reference” theory<sup>4</sup> only concerns *non-conniving* uses of sentences, i.e., when sentences are uttered from a perspective that is external to the fiction, with the intention to express genuine truths that go beyond the context of the fictional narrative<sup>5</sup>. The situation is different when we deal with *conniving* uses of sentences, i.e., sentences that are uttered within the context of a certain pretense involving the telling of a story, whose truth-conditions are merely fictional. In this case, denying reference to real individuals

and content-oriented games of make-believe. See Walton 1990, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> To put it in another way, we can say that, over and above *native characters*, i.e., full-fledged fictional individuals that originate in fiction itself, fictions also involve *immigrant concrete individuals*, i.e., objects that exist in the actual world independently to the fiction. For the notion of immigrant character, see Parsons 1980 and Zalta 1983.

<sup>3</sup> See Landini 1990, Bonomi 1994, 2008, Voltolini 2006, 2009, 2013, Mo-toarca 2014, Terrone 2017. In some respects, also Lamarque and Olsen (1994: 126, 293) share this idea. Usually, with fictional surrogates, one means fictional entities that intentionally—i.e., owing to the author’s choice—correspond to real entities by somehow sharing a significant number of properties with them. For the opposite view, see Friend 2000, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> For this terminology, see Friend 2011: 192. Alternatively, Voltolini (2013: 238) calls “hyperrealists” those philosophers who believe that fictional works only involve fictional individuals, some of which are fictional surrogates of real individuals.

<sup>5</sup> For the distinction between conniving and non-conniving uses, see Evans 1982: 365–6. As Voltolini observes, non-conniving uses “are intended to enable people to speak about the fiction rather than within the fiction” (2006: 118).

would lead to the counterintuitive result that there are not existentially conservative games at all. As Voltolini puts it:

the question of whether there are immigrant concrete objects in fiction concerns only *non-conniving* uses of fictional sentences. Indeed, as far as conniving uses of such sentences are concerned, it is indisputably the case that they may be about concrete individuals. Ordinary existentially conservative games of make-believe typically involve such uses. Since in such games one makes believe of *a certain concrete individual* that it is such and such, one will often make the corresponding linguistic mock-assertion about that very individual. (Voltolini 2006: 118)<sup>6</sup>

When we engage in games of make-believe, the theory that proper names suspend their ordinary reference appears inadequate, since it collides with our natural way of understanding literary works, when the story is not entirely located in a fantasy world<sup>7</sup>. Let us consider an example. When, in 1906, Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*, his aim was to denounce, by means of a fictional story, the exploitation of immigrants in the United States and the harsh living conditions of workers in Chicago, as well as to expose health violations and unsanitary practices in the American meatpacking industry during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work prompted a public outcry that led to reforms such as the *Meat Inspection Act of 1906*. We cannot explain the influence that this book had on public opinion if we are compelled to say that Sinclair's story is not talking about the real Chicago and the real United States, only because he wrote a novel and not a newspaper article: the name "Chicago" in *The Jungle* refers to Chicago, even if some fictional properties are ascribed to the city, such as that it was the place where Jurgis Rudkus and his family, the main characters of the book, used to live.

Let us consider another book, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, whose events are set in the fictional town of Macondo. Condemnation of social injustices appears at the core of this book

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion on this issue, see also Voltolini 2013.

<sup>7</sup> I believe that we can import concrete individuals in fiction from reality even in the case of non-conniving uses of sentences. However, I have not the possibility to address the issue, for an in-depth analysis would bring us too far from the scope of this article. For a criticism of the "no-reference" theory, see Friend 2000, 2011.

too. We could compare, for example, the living condition of banana workers in the plantations of Macondo with the situation of exploitation in Chicago factories. However, no one would make petitions to change the state of affairs in Macondo, for the name “Macondo” does not refer to any real place, no matter whether there are towns very similar to the one featured in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The description of the banana workers’ strike and the massacre that followed is not the report of a specific and historically well-defined case, but the symbol of a situation of injustice and oppression.

Thus, I agree with Friend when she claims that:

The name London [in Orwell’s *1984*] plus other cues prompt the imagination, causing those of us who recognize the reference to open our dossier on London and to begin associating our pre-existing London-notions with new fictional information. (Friend 2011: 202)

It is crucial, for the comprehension of *1984*, to recognize that the story is set in London, and to refuse the idea that Orwell simply describes a fictional place homonymous, and in some respects similar, to the real city. This is true for dystopian novels, as well as parodies, historical tales and, in general, whenever a certain real place, person or object is imported into a fiction.

In a nutshell, I claim that—when we engage in games of make-believe and deal with conniving uses of sentences—(1) real names can be used and, in fact, it often happens, and (2) we get fictional information about the referents of those names. If we accept these two claims, some questions arise. How do we treat real names compared to fictional names? How can we assign fictional properties to real entities? How is fictional information about real entities stored in our mind? I shall argue that the theory of mental files can answer all these questions.

## 2 Regular and indexed files

The theory of mental files has been elaborated by several philosophers in different ways<sup>8</sup>. A recent and influential account is the one

<sup>8</sup> The term “mental file” has been firstly introduced by Perry (1980) and, since then, it has been widely used.

provided by Recanati (2012)<sup>9</sup>. According to Recanati, a mental file is a cognitive structure that we use to create a mental representation about what we take to be a single object of the outside world. The primary function of the mental file is to store information, in the form of a list of predicates, on that particular object. The reference of the file is determined in a non-descriptive way through some kind of acquaintance relation:

Different types of file correspond to different types of relation. The role of the files is to store information about the objects we bear these acquaintance relations to. [...] 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 the relations on which the files are based. The reference is the entity we are acquainted with (in the appropriate way), not the entity that best “fits” information in the file. (Recanati 2012: 33)

In addition to their primary function, mental files may also acquire a derived, *meta-representational function*<sup>10</sup>, when they are used to represent the way other subjects think about objects in the world. This kind of files has an indexed structure:

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. (Recanati 2012: 183)

An indexed file,  $\langle f, S_2 \rangle$ , is thus a file that a subject  $S_1$  uses to represent a file  $f$  that stands in the mind of another subject  $S_2$  (or in the mind of  $S_1$  in a past time). Unlike regular files, they do not presuppose any norm of acquaintance, since they are mere simulative devices that do not guarantee reference to objects of the real world<sup>11</sup>.

There are two possibilities for a given indexed file:

Either the indexed file, which represents some other way of thinking about some entity, is linked to some regular file in the subject’s mind

<sup>9</sup> For further development of the theory, see Recanati 2016.

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the meta-representational function, see Recanati 2012, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> See Recanati 2012: 200.

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 only access to the entity in question is via the filing system of other subjects. (Recanati 2012: 184)

In the first case, indexed files are *loaded*, i.e., linked to regular files. However, when it happens, the type of connection is such that it preserves information encapsulated in each single file. In fact, since indexed files are used to stand for some other subject's body of information about an object, this function could not be served if, through linking between the subject's regular files, the indexed file was contaminated by the subject's own information about that object. As Recanati states:

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 [...] 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. (Recanati 2012: 184)<sup>12</sup>

In the second case, when indexed files are not linked to any regular file, we have what Recanati calls a *free-wheeling*, or *unloaded*, use of the indexed file. In this situation, the subject can only think about an object via the filing system of other subjects: all information at her disposal is the one stored in the indexed file.

### 3 Indexed files in fictional contexts

We have seen that indexed files may be loaded or unloaded. Unloaded files are typically associated with empty names<sup>13</sup>, whereas loaded files are linked with regular files and allow us to figure out how other subjects think about objects of the world. Even if it seems that

<sup>12</sup> For the notion of linking, see also Perry 2002.

<sup>13</sup> See Recanati 2012, 2013. However, so far philosophers have mainly focused on regular files in order to account for fictional characters and the problems they generate. See, for example, Salis 2013, Friend 2014, Terrone 2017.

loaded files have no place in fictional contexts, I disagree with this claim. As I said, in fictional stories, it is quite common to find names of real people, places, and other objects: what happens when we deal with such names used in fiction?

Suppose that two journalists, John and Smith, each write a biography about Donald Trump. It is well-known that John admires Donald Trump, whereas Smith is one of his fiercest critics. Not surprisingly, by reading their books, we obtain two very different portraits of the same individual. Since Donald Trump is a real person and we have direct or mediated acquaintance with him, it is natural to compare these dissimilar representations with our personal opinion about the US President. In other words, we compare information contained in files <TRUMP, John> and <TRUMP, Smith> with information stored in our regular file TRUMP. As a result of this operation, we may conclude that John's book is too much celebratory, while Smith's one is excessively derogatory. It is fair to wonder whether John's or Smith's biographies are faithful to reality not only because the name "Donald Trump" has reference, but also because we take the books as non-fiction: we are supposed to evaluate their claims on Donald Trump as true or false. Since the indexed files are linked with a regular file:

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 [...] 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. (Recanati 2012: 184–5)

Suppose now that we are reading a novel displaying the name of a real individual, like Napoleon in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: we acquire new information about the referent of that name. It does not matter that the information in question is fictitious: we generate an indexed file and we keep the information encapsulated in it. The indexed file is vertically linked with our pre-existing regular file on Napoleon, but their content is not merged: we do not mix fictional information of the former file with real information of the latter. Both files can be exploited, depending on our purposes. We can import in the fic-

tion our knowledge of people or places the story is about, if the story allows or invites us to do so. For instance, once we recognize that Orwell's *1984* takes place in a dystopian London in the near future, we open our regular file on London and associate "our pre-existing London-notions with new fictional information," as Friend suggests (2011: 192). However, it is worth noting that, although we import some pieces of information from reality into the world of *1984*, in order to enrich our comprehension and appreciation of Orwell's story, importation is not automatic: it only takes place as far as the story licenses us to do so. The idea of importation is supported by philosophers that adopt the *Reality Principle*, or similar ones, to investigate what is true in a fiction:

(RP) If  $p_1, \dots, p_n$  are the propositions whose fictionality a representation generates directly, another proposition,  $q$ , is fictional in it if, and only if, were it the case that  $p_1, \dots, p_n$ , it would be the case that  $q$ . (Walton 1990: 145)<sup>14</sup>

Conversely, we can export notions gained from novels in our regular files, when we recognize a specific body of information as non-fictional. A historical novel may depict with high accuracy not only places, events and notable historical figures, but also ways of living, manners, social conditions and other details of the past. For instance, Manzoni's *The Betrothed* is based on rigorous researches and by reading it we learn something true about the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such as the story of the nun of Monza (Marianna de Leyva y Marino) and the events of the Great Plague of 1629–1631, reconstructed on archival documents and chronicles of the time. Or, by reading Sinclair's *The Jungle*, we come to know about the exploitation of immigrants in the

<sup>14</sup> As Walton says: "The interpreter is to ask what the real world would be like if the propositions whose fictionality is generated directly were true: What else would be true if they were? The answer gives the propositions whose fictionality the primary fictional truths imply" (1990: 144–5). Other classic formulations of the Principle can be found in Lewis 1978, Ryan 1980, Wolterstorff 1980 and Evans 1982. Friend has recently argued in favor of a *Reality Assumption*: "everything that is true or obtains in the real world is storified—that is, we are invited to imagine it as part of the storyworld—unless it is excluded by the work" (Friend 2017: 5). By contrast with the more familiar Reality Principle, the Reality Assumption has the merit of being more general and answering for some objections raised against the Reality Principle.



United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Philosophers have widely discussed whether we can obtain true knowledge by reading fictional works and, when they give a positive answer, which kind of knowledge it is.<sup>15</sup> I wish to underline that, if we accept the possibility to import notions from the real world within the fiction and to export at least some form of knowledge from the fiction into the real world, the idea of indexed files proves to be very useful. For vertical linking between indexed and regular files easily explains in which way we keep separate real and fictional information in case of real names used in fictional stories and how knowledge moves from reality to fiction and *vice versa*.

Finally, we can make a comparison between fiction and reality, for example, by walking around the city of London looking for places mentioned in Conan Doyle's stories. We may have fun visiting the Sherlock Holmes Museum at 221B Baker Street, even if we know that, at that time, 85 was the last house number on Baker Street. As an alternative, we may examine the reliability of historical figures depicted in fictional novels. But, here, a clarification is needed. One may wonder whether Shakespeare provides a faithful account of Caesar in his drama, or whether the figure of Napoleon described by Tolstoy in *War and Peace* matches the reality. However, these considerations are subordinate to other kinds of evaluations, such as those concerning aesthetics and literature. Since we are playing a game of make-believe, we are ready to accept information about Caesar or Napoleon without inquiring too much about their truth. We do not blame Shakespeare for inventing some events, because we expect him to do so, whereas our reaction would be very different if we discovered that John or Smith invented something on Donald Trump. Shakespeare's drama is not considered a reliable source of information, contrary to John's or Smith's books, but a source of fictional notions about Caesar.

What happens, instead, when we deal with names of purely fictional characters? Starting from Frege (1982), philosophers have looked at empty names as something exceptional that asks for exceptional explanations, i.e., explanations that differ from the standard

<sup>15</sup> For an introduction on the debate about what we can learn from fiction, see García-Carpintero 2016 and Ichino and Currie 2017.

account of names having reference. Consequently, they set up the study of fiction as a separate domain of language in which special rules are at work. My suggestion is to turn the perspective upside down. The analysis carried out so far was aimed to show that fictional discourse has nothing special: it can be explained with the standard tools made available by the theory of mental files. We are not forced to admit exceptions, since we already have everything we need. Indexed files find their application regardless of the context of pretense,<sup>16</sup> but, as we have seen, they can be successfully employed even to explain the way of functioning of real names, like “Caesar”, “Napoleon” or “London”, in fiction. As regards names of purely fictional characters, my claim is that, once again, files work in the same way: we open an indexed file and we begin to store information in it. But in this case, it is a free-wheeling, or unloaded, use of the indexed file, since we lack a regular, acquaintance-dependent file in our mind to be linked to. Thus, no reference to objects of the real world is made and no comparison between fiction and reality is possible. We only have fictional information that we gain from the story and that we store in the indexed file. To grasp this point, let us consider the case in which the same fictional character appears in two distinct literary works, being portrayed in different manners depending on the stories. A famous example is Ulysses as it is presented in *The Odyssey* and in *The Divine Comedy*. Since no real person is the referent of the name “Ulysses”, and thus of the indexed mental files, it does not make sense to ask whether or not Ulysses in Homer’s poems resembles a historical Ulysses more than Dante’s one. Information, corresponding to the properties that each work of fiction assigns to Ulysses, is gathered within two distinct indexed files and remains encapsulated into them. We can compare these dissimilar versions of Ulysses with each other, assign our preference to one rather than the other, but that is all.

Given this background, it seems that no mechanism of importation or exportation can take place, such as those described above. I agree with regard to the phenomenon of exportation, because there is no further mental box to which information can migrate. However, we can make room for importation, if we accept the Reality

<sup>16</sup> See Recanati 2012.

Principle, or some variants of it as the Reality Assumption proposed by Friend (2017). According to RP, since the myth tells us that Ulysses is a man, it is reasonable to believe that, in the fiction, he has all the features that human beings typically possess, even if such individual does not exist in the actual world. As Walton says: “It is because people in the real world have blood in their veins, births, and backsides that fictional characters are presumed to possess these attributes” (1990: 145). These pieces of information do not come from a regular file about a flesh-and-blood Ulysses, that does not exist, but from our knowledge of human beings, plus other general notions about the way the world is made.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, it is necessary to specify to what mental files are indexed. I suggest that we do not need to index mental files to any individual subject, since we can index them directly to the fiction itself. One may object that, according to the theory of mental files, indexed files are tools that we have at disposal for representing, in our mind, the point of view of other people. An indexed file simulates the mental state of the indexed subject, so it does not make sense to index files to fictions, for fictions are not the sort of things that have a mental life. However, I see no theoretical obstacle in stretching the notion of indexed file so as to include also such kind of cases<sup>18</sup>. When we take part in a game of make-believe, we are urged to imagine a specific situation and to adopt specific mental attitudes, for instance, by accepting the told story as unquestionably true,<sup>19</sup> no matter whether it involves nonexistent people and events that are bizarre and unrealistic. In the files we store information that we associate to the world of the story, as participants of that game. More precisely, we could say that, by indexing the file to a fiction, we mean to participate to a certain practice of make-believe, in which we put ourselves in the mind

<sup>17</sup> How can we account for general notions like “human being”? Probably, we need to make room for the idea that, in addition to singular mental files, i.e., files that refer to particular objects of the external world, there are also general mental files for groups of objects and abstract concepts. The thesis is supported by Crane (2013) and Sainsbury and Tye (2013).

<sup>18</sup> In a recent work, Recanati adopts a similar conception of indexed files in order to account for parafictional utterances. See Recanati 2018.

<sup>19</sup> With the exception of unreliable narratives.

of someone that is not pretending, but truly believes in the facts depicted by the story. Similarly, in standard, non-fictional, situations, we put ourselves in the mind of an external subject to represent her mental states. It is just the same act of simulation.

#### 4 Regular files and fictional characters

So far, I have discussed indexed files and the role that they have in our understanding of fiction. It is now time to turn our attention also to regular files. I began my analysis by considering the use of real names in fictional stories and I argued that they work in the same way as names of purely fictional characters do. When we deal with a novel, both real and fictional names lead us to open indexed files in which we store information derived from the novel. But similarities, it seems, stop at this point. In fact, in the case of real names, the indexed file is vertically linked with a regular file that we already possess. On the contrary, in the case of fictional names, we have a free-wheeling, or unloaded, use of the indexed file. However, I think that we can push the analogy further and make room for regular files even in the latter case. The reason why we should do so is that there are two different ways we can speak about literary characters: we can claim something, for instance, about Madame Bovary either from the inside or from the outside of the fiction itself. A sentence like:

- (1) Emma Bovary falls in love with Rodolphe Boulanger

when uttered with a conniving use, i.e., from a perspective that is internal to the fiction, is a *fictional sentence*. Fictional sentences do not involve any genuine fact about the actual world, but facts related to the world of the story: they have truth-values only insofar as we engage in a practice of make-believe. On the contrary, sentence:

- (2) Emma Bovary is a fictional character

when uttered with a non-conniving use, i.e., with the aim to say something genuinely true about a literary character from a perspective that is external to any fiction, is a *metafictional sentence*.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The terminology is borrowed from Voltolini (2006). According to philosophers like van Inwagen (1977), Schiffer (1996), Thomasson (1999, 2003), Kripke

We have two kinds of information corresponding to two distinct ways we can talk about a literary character: some pieces of information concern the fiction; others do not. Therefore, we should not treat all information on Bovary as being of the same sort, i.e., as belonging to the same file. Indexed files only contain information drawn from the fiction. But it is not true, in Flaubert's novel, that Emma Bovary is a fictional character. On the contrary, she is depicted as a flesh-and-blood woman. Metafictional information derives from our comprehension of literature and our knowledge of the world. As informed readers, we know that literary works often depict characters that are completely made up. We also know that Emma Bovary never existed and so any chronicle of her romantic adventures must be a figment of imagination.

There is another crucial difference between fictional and metafictional sentences. Generally<sup>21</sup>, the former refer to literary characters as spatiotemporally located individuals who live, think, have feelings, die. On the contrary, metafictional sentences refer to literary characters as abstract objects, i.e., something that does not exist spatiotemporally and can be created by an author, can move from a fictional work to another, has aesthetic and literary values, and so on.<sup>22</sup>

(2013) and Recanati (2018), metafictional sentences force us to accept ontological commitments to literary and mythological entities. I shall leave aside parafictional sentences, which deserve a special analysis. At this regard, see Recanati 2018. It is worth noting that the distinction between fictional and metafictional sentences on the one hand, and, on the other, between conniving and non-conniving uses do not perfectly overlap, given that there are sentences that may be uttered, depending on the context, either connivingly or a non-connivingly. For a discussion on this topic, see Voltolini 2010: 108.

<sup>21</sup> There are some exceptions due to the existence of "metafictional" narratives. See Voltolini 2006: 214–5.

<sup>22</sup> Here, I endorse a conception of fictional entities as abstract artifacts, like the one proposed by Thomasson (1999), for it seems to me the best account for dealing with fictional entities when we talk about them from a metafictional perspective, but I cannot tackle in detail this topic. For a development of the theory of mental files in this direction, see Terrone 2017. However, the theory of mental files is also compatible with the neo-Meinongian framework, as suggested by Recanati (1998, 2000, 2006). So, one can remain neutral about the nature of fictional entities, whether they must be conceived as eternal and immutable Platonic objects or created and contingent artifacts.

If we stored fictional and metafictional information in the same file, we would keep together incompatible pieces of data, thus generating inconsistencies and contradictions. Emma Bovary cannot be, at the same time, a concrete individual such as a flesh-and-blood woman and an abstract entity such as a fictional character<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, consider the sentence:

(3) Sherlock Holmes is famous all over the world.

Of course, it is true that Sherlock Holmes, as a fictional character, is famous: indeed, it is one of the most famous characters of the whole literature. But inside the novels written by Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes is a quite unknown detective. So, in a single file we should store two contradictory predicates: “being famous” and “not being famous”.

For all these reasons, I think that we need to match the indexed file with a regular file. The former collects information about Emma Bovary drawn from Flaubert’s novel, for instance “having adulterous affairs”, “committing suicide”, and so on. We pretend to attribute this kind of predicates to a real woman whose tragic life is narrated in the book. When we deal with a fictional sentence like (1), we are using an indexed file such as <BOVARY, *Emma Bovary*>. On the contrary, the regular file BOVARY contains information from a perspective external to the context of pretense, i.e., information about Bovary as figment of the imagination of an author such as “being a fictional character”, “being invented by Gustave Flaubert”, “being the main character of a novel”, and so on. The regular file refers to an abstract object, which is no more the woman Bovary.<sup>24</sup> When we consider a metafictional sentence like (2), we use such kind of file.

I suggest that we need regular files for storing metafictional information because, at this level, we are talking about fictional characters as abstract objects without any engagement in a game of make-believe, so it does not make sense to use files indexed to the fiction. Moreover, when we utter a metafictional sentence, we are

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on this two-fold nature of fictional characters, see Terrone 2017 and Recanati 2018.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of how mental files can refer to abstract objects, see Terrone 2017.

not reporting someone else's point of view, but we are expressing our own beliefs, exactly as we do when we use our regular files about Julius Caesar or Napoleon to express what we know about those people, not what Shakespeare or Tolstoy claim in their stories.

Once we admit the idea that we have both regular and indexed files for fictional characters, we can say that the latter are vertically connected with the former. This linking accounts for the two-fold nature of literary characters: when we talk about the concrete individual, we deploy the indexed file; when we talk about the abstract object, we deploy the regular file. Moreover, we can use both the regular or the indexed file to interpret a sentence as either fictional or metafictional. Consider the following example:

(4) The Father is a fictional character

“Being a fictional character” is a typical predicate to be put in a regular file. However, there are metafictional narratives whose protagonists are not characterized in the usual way as flesh-and-blood individuals, but instead as fictional characters. The Father in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is the case in point.<sup>25</sup> So, the predicate “being a fictional character” can be assigned to either a regular or an indexed file. But in one case we obtain a metafictional sentence, since we are using information contained in the file FATHER, in the other case a fictional sentence, derived from the file <FATHER, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*>. Thus, my claim is that, at the cognitive level, the difference between a fictional sentence and a metafictional sentence, or (to recall Evans' distinction) between conniving and non-conniving uses of a sentence, is explained by the type of files that we deploy. The same analysis also applies to the example of Sherlock Holmes we mentioned before. Sentence (3) can be read in two ways and, depending on whether we consider (3) as a fictional or a metafictional sentence, it has different truth-conditions and information goes in different files.

Usually, we have both the indexed file and the regular one, linked together. But it is possible to only possess either the indexed file alone, or the regular file alone. The first case occurs, for example, when we are not sure about the status of a character presented within

<sup>25</sup> See Voltolini 2006: 214.

a novel. For instance, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, literary criticism has highlighted that many characters that we used to believe as being purely fictional are in fact historical figures of the Russian aristocracy who lived for real. Thus, a non-perfectly informed reader may wonder whether a character like Nikolai Bolkonsky is fictional or real. Such a reader can suspend the judgment by only keeping in her mind the indexed file with the notions drawn from the narrative, i.e., the information on Nikolai Bolkonsky as it is depicted in *War and Peace*, without questioning about the historical background. The second case occurs, for example, when a subject is aware of the existence of a novel written by Gustave Flaubert, whose main character is a certain Emma Bovary, but she has never read the book, nor she knows anything about the plot. Therefore, the subject only has some metafictional information on Emma Bovary, conceived as an abstract object, that she stores in the regular file BOVARY.

## 5 Conclusion

The starting point of my analysis was the claim that in fictional stories we can find both empty and non-empty singular terms, i.e., in addition to names that are entirely made up, fictions deploy names of individuals that exist in the actual world. Following Voltolini (2006) and Friend (2011), I assumed that, when we deal with coniving uses of sentences, real names maintain their ordinary reference and we get fictional information about the referents of those names. We have seen that, by means of the theory of mental files, we can provide a unitary cognitive account of how names work in fiction. I claimed that the crucial notion we need is not the one of regular file, but the notion of indexed file. Indexed files are needed to store all and solely those pieces of information that we associate to the world of the fictional story, as participants of a certain game of make-believe, without merging them with our knowledge of the actual world that is, instead, stored in our regular files. Both files can be exploited, depending on the situation, for importation or exportation of information between reality and fiction. Then, we have seen that files still work in the same way when we deal with names of purely fictional characters: we open indexed files and we begin to store information in them. However, in this case, no reference



to concrete individuals of the actual world is made and no parallel between fiction and reality is possible, since the only information we have is the one derived from the story. As far as names of purely fictional characters are concerned, regular files can be used to account for the difference between fictional and metafictional sentences or, to be more precise, between conniving and non-conniving uses of such sentences. I argued that, from a cognitive point of view, the distinction between the two types of sentences can be explained in terms of the mental files that are engaged. We use indexed files when we talk about a character from a perspective that is internal to the fiction. On the contrary, we adopt regular files when we want to say something true or false about the very same character regardless of any specific practice of pretense or make-believe. However, regular files refer to fictional entities not as flesh-and-blood individuals, like they are usually depicted in their relevant stories, but as abstract objects. It was not the purpose of this work to provide a theory about the metaphysical nature of fictional objects. However, now that a more precise cognitive account of how people conceive of literary characters in their mind has been offered, we can start from here to develop a further analysis of the ontological and metaphysical aspects of the issue.<sup>26</sup>

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