

## Cognitivism, Significance and Singular Thought\*

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It has become popular in the recent literature on singular (or *de re*) thought to identify the phenomenon of thinking a singular thought with the phenomenon of ‘thinking with a mental file’: according to what I call the *mental-file conception of singular thought* (the MFC) one thinks a singular thought about an object *o* iff one’s thought employs a mental-file on *o*.<sup>1</sup>

This paper has two targets: a broad target and a narrow target. The broad target is the MFC. The narrow target is a specific version of the MFC, proposed by Robin Jeshion, and known as ‘cognitivism’ about singular thought. The argument given here against Jeshion’s view will give us preliminary reason to think there are cases of non-singular file-based thought—thus giving us reason to reject the MFC in general.

The structure of the paper is as follows. I first outline Jeshion’s version of the MFC and argue that her theory of singular thought should be rejected because there are independent reasons to reject the central connection she makes between the notion of *significance* and that of *singularity*. However, my argument grants Jeshion her claim that is a connection between *significance* and *file-thinking* (for some kinds of files).<sup>2</sup> The upshot of the argument is therefore not only that we have reason to reject Jeshion’s significance constraint on singular thought, but that we have preliminary reason to reject the connection between file-thinking and singularity. After arguing against Jeshion’s view, I draw some conclusions about what lessons we should learn about the MFC.

### I Cognitivism and the Mental Files Conception of Singular Thought

Anyone committed to the following bi-conditional dependence between singular thought and file-thinking is committed to the MFC: one thinks a singular thought about *o* iff one’s thought involves the use of a mental file on *o*.

Robin Jeshion (2010) is one of the central recent advocates of the MFC. Unlike some MFC proponents, she holds that there is no *acquaintance constraint* on thinking with a mental file: file-thinking does not require a causally based epistemic or informational relation to the file’s referent.<sup>3</sup> In turn, this means there is no acquaintance constraint on singular thought. Instead, Jeshion proposes to replace the traditional acquaintance constraint on singular thought with a *cognitive* constraint. In particular, she claims it is ‘a rule of cognition’ that, in order for a subject *s* to open, maintain and use a mental file about an object *o*, it is necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Recent proponents of the MFC include Jeshion (2010) & Recanati (2012).

<sup>2</sup> If Jeshion is right that there is a significance constraint on file-thinking, this constraint will apply only to non-perceptual files. For elaboration, see n. 17, n. 21 & §IV.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Recanati (2010) & (2012: 167 & 168) thinks that acquaintance is a normative requirement on opening a file but, simplifying somewhat, allows for descriptive reference-fixing for files on the condition of either expected or ‘imagined’ acquaintance.

that *o* is *significant* to *s*, where this means *s* must have ‘...interests, goals, knowledge and affective states tied to...’ *o* (Jeshion, 2010: 136). Jeshion’s commitment to the MFC, plus her commitment to this *significance condition* on mental files yields her commitment to a *significance condition* on singular thought.

Jeshion has always motivated her version of the MFC by presenting it as a third alternative that avoids the pitfalls of the two views that would otherwise dominate the literature on singular thought: *acquaintance theory* and *semantic instrumentalism*. The acquaintance theory holds that singular thought about an object *o* requires *acquaintance* with *o*, where acquaintance is a causally based, epistemic-access relation.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore fairly *conservative* with respect to the attribution of singular thought. *How* conservative depends on the particular conception of acquaintance adopted, but acquaintance sets the limit on singular thought attributions.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the semantic instrumentalist begins with the *apparently* relevant semantic data that one can introduce, or come into possession of, a name or singular referential device for an object *o*, and can therefore make singular linguistic *reference* to *o*, in a range of cases in which one bears no causally-based epistemic-access relation to *o*. If we add the premise that being able to introduce and use such terms implies one can understand the semantic contents expressed by them, this suggests that singular thought about *o* is possible without *acquaintance* with *o*. Semantic instrumentalism is therefore very *liberal* about attributions of singular thought: if you possess an identifying description for an object *o*, semantic instrumentalists claim you can think a singular thought about *o* by exploiting the mechanisms of direct reference (for example, by introducing a name, demonstrative or that expression referring to *o*).<sup>6</sup>

Jeshion’s version of MFC is advertised as a view that splits the difference between these views, and therefore frees us from the horns of the dilemma set in place by a choice between two views that are too extreme to accommodate our intuitions. The acquaintance theory is too restrictive—it rules out cases we might intuitively want to count as singular. Semantic instrumentalism is on the other hand too liberal. It does away with substantive non-semantic constraints on singular thought altogether, holding there is free generation of singular thought through the manipulation of descriptively introduced referential terms (DIRTS) like descriptive names & that terms.<sup>7</sup> Jeshion’s solution is a theory according to which there *are* substantive constraints on singular thought, but these constraints are *cognitive* or *functional*, rather than *causal* or *epistemic*. A helpful way to think about her proposal is that cases of thought about an object that is *significant* to the thinker form a cognitive *natural kind*. This kind nets a broader range of cases than the acquaintance theory, but a more restricted range than semantic instrumentalism, and it lines up with our intuitions about singularity.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Acquaintance’ is not used as an ordinary language term, or an intuitive notion (for example, familiarity). For almost all acquaintance theorists, *acquaintance* is a technical notion. For examples of acquaintance theorists, see Bach (1987); Boer and Lycan (1986); Burge (1977); Evans (1982); Kaplan (1969); Lewis (1983); Russell (1912); Recanati (1993), (2012); Salmon (1987); Soames (2001).

<sup>5</sup> On the most popular contemporary version of acquaintance theory, there are three ways to be acquainted with an object: perception, memory of perception or communication with someone who has perceived the object or has communicated with someone who has perceived the object. See Bach (1987) for the most clearly articulated and well-worked out version of this view.

<sup>6</sup> Those who advocate semantic instrumentalism are: Borg (2007); Harman (1977); Kaplan (1989a), (1989b);

<sup>7</sup> This does imply the general *semantic* restriction that one must have mastery of the relevant mechanisms of direct reference: she must know how to generate a DIRT.

Jeshion's cognitivist theory shares with semantic instrumentalism that it discards a causal-cum-epistemic constraint on singular thought. However, semantic instrumentalism is a *voluntaristic* view, which conceives of the formation of singular thoughts as a personal (as opposed to sub-personal) level affair. Jeshion rejects this. She claims that whether or not a thinker entertains a singular thought about an object depends on whether that thinker possesses a mental file on the object and employs that file, but the production of a mental file is in her view not a matter that is up to the agent. Rather, it is determined by facts about the agent's mental economy, which are not within agent control. In particular, Jeshion claims it is simply a 'rule of cognition' (an empirical law about how minds work) that a mental file on an object is opened (and presumably maintained rather than discarded) iff the object is *significant* to the thinker.<sup>8</sup>

So, for Jeshion, singular thought is a cognitive or functional category, rather than an epistemic or informational category (contra the acquaintance theorist) and it is, broadly speaking, non-voluntary (contra the semantic instrumentalist). Commitment to the mental files conception of singular thought is central to Jeshion's view (we'll see more about how momentarily). It is worth noting, however, that neither acquaintance theorists nor semantic instrumentalists necessarily need to reject the alignment of singular thought with mental-files. It is open to proponents of both views to adopt the MFC as I have stated it but, to the extent that they accept the MFC, they will have substantive disagreement with Jeshion about the conditions on mental-file formation. An acquaintance theorist who adopts the MFC will place an acquaintance constraint on mental-file formation (Recanati, 1993 & 2012).<sup>9</sup> A semantic instrumentalist who adopts the MFC will reject the acquaintance constraint on mental-file formation but will also reject Jeshion's significance constraint on file formation, claiming instead that the production of mental-files is voluntary.<sup>10</sup>

## II An Argument for Cognitivism

Recently, Jeshion has offered an intuition-based argument for cognitivism, the form of which gives us a good sense of how her commitments hang together.<sup>11</sup> This argument is based on intuitions about three sets of cases.

The cases in Set 1 pass what Jeshion calls the 'the standard, standard on acquaintance':

**Standard, Standard on Acquaintance (SSA):** One can be acquainted with an object *o* only by perception, memory and communication chains. To have a singular thought about *o*, someone in one's linguistic community must have perceived *o*. (Jeshion, 2010: 109)

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<sup>8</sup> Since what this means for Jeshion is that the thinker has goals, projects, and affective states that are directed at that object, charity dictates that we don't read her as claiming that the formation of singular thought is *entirely* the result of sub-personal processes. Although it is not simply 'up to us' which objects are (and aren't) significant to us (this is a point Jeshion emphasizes), it is presumably within our power as agents who perform intentional actions, to structure our goals, plans, projects (and even our affective states) in particular ways, at least to some extent.

<sup>9</sup> See n.3 for further elaboration of Recanati's version of the acquaintance constraint.

<sup>10</sup> Hawthorne and Manley (2010) do not actually commit to the MFC but do express sympathy for it. Converting their sympathy for the MFC into commitment and holding many of their other commitments fixed might produce a view, which would count as a semantic instrumentalist version of the MFC.

<sup>11</sup> Her previous arguments for cognitivism focus on questions about the semantics for descriptive names and the psycho-semantics of name-use more generally. See Jeshion (2002), (2004), (2006) & (2009)

SSA states the standard for the most common form of acquaintance constraint in the literature. Set 1 contains cases in which the thinker perceives the object of her thought, cases in which she has previously perceived the object and remembers her perceptual encounter, and cases in which she is connected to it via a communication chain (paradigmatically, one involving uses of a proper name) (Jeshion (2010: 113). According to Jeshion, all parties agree that such cases ought to be counted as instances of singular thought, and this verdict of these cases lines up with our intuitions.<sup>12</sup>

Jeshion's second set of examples contains cases that the semantic instrumentalist will classify as singular thought *without* acquaintance, but which the (standard) acquaintance theorist counts as descriptive. Set 2 includes cases in which a DIRT is available, but the thinker has no particular interest in, goals involving, or investment in an object:

**Reference with a descriptive name:**

'Evans claims to have fixed the reference of 'Julius', by description, with the description 'the inventor of the zipper'. In asserting, 'Julius was clever', does Evans (or do we) have a singular thought about Julius?' (Jeshion, 2010: 114)

**Reference with a dthat expression:**

'Kaplan says 'Dthat (the shortest spy in the world) is pretty short'. Does he thus think a singular thoughts about the individual who happens to be the shortest spy?' (Jeshion, 2010: 115)

**Reference through Deferred Ostension:**

'You are running along the edge of the Pacific Ocean and see a trail of footprints in the sand. You think to yourself, 'Man, he has big feet!'. You have not interest whatsoever in discovering whom the big-footed runner is, and no standing general interest in foot sizes. As you run along, you give no further thought to the footprint. Again, our question is: does the subject have singular thoughts about the footprint-maker?' (Jeshion, 2010: 116)

According to Jeshion, most people will have the intuition that the cases in Set 2 (at least as spelled out in the minimal way above) ought *not* to be counted as cases of singular thought. Furthermore, Jeshion thinks they *react* to this intuition by adopting an acquaintance constraint on singular thought. In other words, they assume the only way to stave off semantic instrumentalism is to adopt the acquaintance theory.<sup>13</sup>

The cases in Set 3 are meant to show what is wrong with this reaction. Set 3 cases also fail the SSA but, according to Jeshion, our intuitions about these cases are different: despite

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, those who endorse a *stricter* acquaintance constraint—one that does not allow for testimonial acquaintance—won't think that cases in which the thinker bears a causal, communicational connection to the object of her thought (but lacks a current or remembered perceptual connection to the object) are cases of singular thought. For example, see Evans (1982).

<sup>13</sup> I assume Jeshion would say the desire to stave off semantic instrumentalism is itself based on intuitions about the cases. If not (and absent some theoretical reason to be suspicious of semantic instrumentalism) the desire to stave off semantic instrumentalism looks puzzling. I take it Jeshion's thought here is that a view on which singular thought comes too cheaply is *intuitively* unappealing.

the lack of acquaintance, these cases are meant to prompt an intuition of singularity. Here are two of Jeshion's Set 3 cases:

**Adoption:**

'Imagine a well-adjusted adoptee of loving adoptive parents who, because of his closed adoption, lacks all access to knowledge of his biological parents. Yet he yearns to know them, especially his biological mother. He wonders what she is like, fantasizes about meeting her, writes letters to her in the hopes that he may someday get to know her. He says, 'I'll do anything to finally meet her.' (Jeshion, 2010: 117)

**Bear print:**

'I go off camping in the Sierras with my family. We set up our tent, hoist our food in a tree. My son looks anxious and I assure him that there probably aren't any bears in the area, that we're just taking precautions. After setting up, we head to the stream for a dip. The mud on the banks reveals what I recognize to be a grown male bear's footprints.... Knowing what we know about bears—especially, that they are solitary and territorial—we automatically start debating about whether we should go AWOL. I say, 'I think we should get off his turf.' (Jeshion, 2010: 117)

Jeshion's argument is essentially that noticing the difference between Set 2 and Set 3 cases gives us reason to reject the apparent dilemma of choosing between the acquaintance theory and semantic instrumentalism. She thinks that a view that can account for the intuition that cases in Set 2 and Set 3 ought to be classified *differently* (Set 2 as descriptive, Set 3 as singular) has an advantage over both the acquaintance theory and semantic instrumentalism. *Cognitivism*, Jeshion's version of MFC, is just this: it is a view that acknowledges and *explains* why the cases in Sets 1 and Set 3 are taken to be singular, but not the cases in Set 2.

Jeshion claims that what distinguishes Set 2 from Set 3 cases is *significance*: The agents in the Set 3 cases care about the objects of their thought, these objects are integral to their plans, projects and reasoning.<sup>14</sup> The presence of significance underpins the status of the Set 3 cases as singular, and the absence of it explains the intuition that Set 2 cases are *not* genuine instances of singular thought.

But even granting there is a difference of significance between the Set 2 and Set 3 cases, the obvious question is, 'why does *significance* make a difference of a relevant kind?'. The difference between a singular thought and a descriptive thought about the same object to the effect that it possesses the same property is *at least* that the two thoughts have different semantic content.<sup>15</sup> But, why would the fact that an object is *significant* make a difference to the *semantic* content of thoughts about it?

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<sup>14</sup> We can see from this that *significance* is defined relative to subjects. See Jeshion (2010), 136.

<sup>15</sup> This will be true even for those who dispute the claim that all singular thoughts have singular content (for example, because they think there can be empty singular thoughts). Such theorists will still hold, firstly, that a singular thought and a descriptive thought *about the same object* to the effect that it possesses the same property have different content and, secondly, that singular thoughts (even if they do not all have *singular* content) do not have *descriptive* content.

Jeshion's answer to this question is basically that significance results in a *genuine cognitive difference*. Significance makes for a genuine cognitive difference because it shapes the sort of mechanisms for keeping track of a particular thing that are put to use in an agent's cognitive economy. If an object is significant to you, it will be important that you have a cognitive mechanism for keeping track of it—that is, a convenient, efficient and reliable way to store and access information about that object, and to do so in a way that allows you to add to and remove information from your stock of information in a streamlined way that minimizes cognitive effort and possible errors. Unsurprisingly, then, there are mechanisms in a mental economy that allow for exactly this kind of efficient, streamlined tracking of objects within and across contexts. We call these mechanisms *mental-files*.

On Jeshion's view, when an object is significant to you, your cognitive system will keep a mental file on that object. And, this isn't because you will *decide* to keep a file on that object. It is rather because your cognitive system will decide for you. Your cognitive system will automatically (i.e., without agent control) open mental-files on objects that are central to your goals and projects, and it will refrain from opening files on objects that aren't.

It is an important part of Jeshion's position that this connection between significance and file-formation has the status, in her words, of a 'rule of cognition' (Jeshion, 2010: 136). Firstly, this element of the view distinguishes it from semantic instrumentalism. Semantic instrumentalists are *voluntarists* about singular thought: they hold that, given mastery of certain semantic machinery, it's up to the *agent* whether she thinks about some object in a singular way. In contrast, Jeshion's claim is that singular thought formation is a sub-personal affair: whether a thinker thinks singularly depends on whether her thought employs a mental-file, but the question of whether a file exists in the thinkers cognitive economy is not up to the agent, it's up to cognition. Secondly, the particular status (as a rule of cognition) of the connection between significance and file-formation means that significance is not just a *necessary* condition on file-formation. Rather, Jeshion's view is also that, when an object is significant, the mind *automatically* opens, maintains and employs a mental-file to think of that object. Significance acts to 'trigger' the use of a mental-file. The dependence relation is therefore biconditional.<sup>16</sup>

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Let's review Jeshion's argument, and see how her commitments come together into a theory of *singular thought*. The first step of the argument is the claim that, although neither Set 2 nor Set 3 cases involve acquaintance, they are intuitively different, so we should look for something to account for this difference. The second step is the claim that, in doing so, we see that the cases in Set 3 involve significance, whereas the Set 2 cases do not. The third step is Jeshion's claim that this amounts to a *genuine cognitive difference*, because significance triggers the use of a mental-file. Set 3 cases involve thinking with a mental-file, whereas Set 2 cases

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<sup>16</sup> For an explicit statement of the claim that there is biconditional dependence between significance and file use, see Jeshion (2009), 396. However, as Dave Hilbert pointed out in conversation, the language of biconditional dependence is in fact too strong. Jeshion takes the connection between significance and file-formation to have something like the status of an empirical law about how minds work (I take it this is what is intended by the idea of 'a rule of cognition'), but such laws admit of exception (for example, in defective cases). Thus, we could perhaps think of the claim as a *ceteris paribus* biconditional. The point I wish to make here, however, is that Jeshion takes the dependence between significance and file-formation to run in both directions (even if it is weaker than biconditional dependence).

do not. If we add to these commitments the MFC, we yield Jeshion's view that there is a biconditional dependence between significance and singular thought.<sup>17</sup>

### III Taking Stock

In §IV, I will argue that the connection Jeshion posits between significance and singularity does not hold, but before giving this argument, I want to pause and note three points about Jeshion's position, which are important for my overall argument.

The first point is simple but, in my view, it is central point for properly assessing Jeshion's argument. Even if Jeshion is right that significance accounts for a genuine cognitive difference between the Set 2 and Set 3 cases, this falls short of establishing that this cognitive difference lines up with the distinction between singular and general thought. In fact, it falls short of showing that the difference ought to be understood as a difference of content, or a semantic difference, at all. As I noted in §II, the difference between a singular and a general thought about the same object predicating the same property of that object is *at least* a difference of content, but there are many genuine cognitive differences that are not semantic differences. For example, consider the difference between the state of believing that P and that of doubting that P. There are genuine cognitive differences between these states, despite the fact that they have the same semantic content. To prove that there was a cognitive difference between these mental states would not show they have different content, and the same general point applies to the Set 2 and Set 3 cases: the genuine cognitive difference between them might not amount to a semantic difference. The point of flagging this is to illustrate that Jeshion has taken on a *burden* here that she must discharge if her argument for cognitivism is to be convincing: if she *has* pinpointed a genuine cognitive difference between Set 2 and Set 3 cases, she needs to convince us that this cognitive difference lines up with the singular/general distinction. My argument against her view will in part hinge on the question of whether this burden has been discharged.

Secondly, if the MFC—that is, the biconditional dependence between file-thinking and singular thinking—is true, then Jeshion's argument goes through. The MFC provides the bridge between the claim that significance makes for the difference between file-based thought and non-file-based thought and the claim that it makes for the difference between singular and descriptive thought. But, Jeshion does not supply an *independent argument* for the truth of the MFC.<sup>18</sup> In a sense, her argument for cognitivism *relies* on the MFC but doesn't

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<sup>17</sup> A charitable reading of Jeshion should, however, involve reading this *ceteris paribus* bi-conditional to have limited scope, in that it is intended to apply only to non-perceptual cases. For further discussion, see §IV. Her discussion of perception-based files implies that she does not require that the objects of these files are significant to the thinker. After all, cognition employs so-called 'object-files' even in cases where the agent does not have plans, projects and affective states directed at the perceived object. Thus, the bi-conditional dependence should be understood to hold between *non-perception-based mental files* and significance.

<sup>18</sup> Jeshion (2010) explicitly claims that the use of mental-files is what distinguishes singular from descriptive thought (p. 132)—a claim which amounts to adopting the MFC. She also includes a discussion in which she claims that it is a function of mental-files to 'constitute singular thinking about the individual the file is about' (p.132). She gives a justification for the claim that files have this 'singular function', which is based on the speculation that the use of mental-files is ontogenetically rooted in the coupling of object-files with FINSTS in cases of visual demonstrative cognition (p. 134-135). Her idea is that file-based thought constitutes singular thought because file-thinking in general plays the same functional role (the role of serving as a singular referring device in thought) as files that have their referents fixed by FINSTS. I take this discussion to provide a suggestion as to how the singular function of mental-files might be conceived, rather than an *argument* for the claim (adopted by Jeshion and other MFC proponents) that file-based thought is what distinguishes singular

establish it. Thus, the question of whether there is solid independent reason to think the MFC is true—or reason to think it is false—makes a difference to the dialectic, and to the overall strength of Jeshion’s position.<sup>19</sup>

The third point is that it counts in *favor* of Jeshion’s view that her explanation of when cognition does (and doesn’t) use mental-files is plausible, and lines up with our existing understanding of what mental-files are and the role they play in thought. A mental-file is a matter of object-tracking and information-clustering (Recanati, 2012: 42): it is essentially a cluster of predicates that is stored together and used together in a mental economy, in a way that embodies a standing presupposition that these predicates apply to the same object.<sup>20</sup> In short, mental-files are tracking and storage mechanisms that allow for streamlined access and update of information about particular things. Jeshion’s very reasonable suggestion is that the mind employs this kind of efficient tracking and storage mechanism when an object is one the thinker has some interest in. Since files are mechanisms for keeping track of individuals and reasoning efficiently about them, a cognitive system has cause to employ these mechanisms when the object has some significance to the thinker.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, it is simply a part of how our minds work, at the sub-personal level, that significance *automatically* triggers the use of this mechanism.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV Does Significance Govern Singularity?

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from descriptive thought. She presents her discussion of the singular function of files as an elaboration of the position she favors (and the possible empirical underpinnings of that position) rather than an argument for the truth of that position. Apart from anything else, the elaboration is suggestive and lacks details, and would have to be filled out significantly in order to count as an argument for the MFC. Although I can’t be sure, I don’t think Jeshion would disagree with this characterization.

<sup>19</sup> Having said this, while I stand by the claim that Jeshion does not provide independent support for the MFC, not all support comes in the form of an independent argument. General support for the MFC is perhaps provided by the success of Jeshion’s overall theory. In particular, one might think the MFC is supported by the fact that cognitivism—a theory incorporating the MFC—does justice to our intuitions about singularity. Jeshion claims the presence of significance entails the use of mental-files, which in turn constitutes singular thought. We can then look back and see that our intuitive judgments about which cases are and aren’t singular line up with this proposal.

<sup>20</sup> This is what allows them to play the role of accounting for inferences that ‘trade on’ the identity of reference of different bits of information. See Campbell (1987) for explanation of the notion of ‘trading on identity’.

<sup>21</sup> As I claimed in n. 17, this claim cannot be intended by Jeshion as a general claim about all kinds of mental files. The notion of a file has been used independently in philosophy, psychology and linguistics, and it cannot be assumed at the outset that there is simple unity among all the notions posited (although they may be related in interesting ways). For example, it is implausible that the files introduced to account for anaphor by Discourse Representation Theorists in linguistics (See, e.g., Kamp (1981), (1995); Heim (1982)) are subject to Jeshion’s significance constraint, and there is no reason to think *she* assumes that they are. Similarly, it is implausible that FINSTS (files posited by psychologists to account for the perceptual system’s ability to track objects over the course of short-term perceptual encounters) are subject to a significance condition (See Pylyshyn (1989)). Even within the *philosopher’s* file-theoretic framework, there are different *kinds* of files posited (See Recanati (1993) & (2012) for a possible taxonomy of the different kinds of files). One plausible way to think about Jeshion’s significance condition is that it applies to what Recanati (1993) & (2012) calls ‘encyclopedia entries’: long-term files used to keep track of individuals across different contexts.

<sup>22</sup> One might worry that Jeshion’s significance condition is underspecified or, relatedly, that significance must come by degrees, whereas file-formation presumably does not (see Sawyer, 2012: 274). As Sawyer (2012) notes, Jeshion can respond with the idea that her significance condition is met at a certain threshold for significance. Setting aside further discussion of the nuances of this issue, I still take the idea that significance and the use of files in a mental economy *line up* to be plausible for cases of non-perceptual files. (For more on the distinction between perceptual and non-perceptual files, see §IV)

On Jeshion's view, a subject  $s$  thinks a singular thought about  $o$  iff  $o$  is significant to  $s$ . This entails that, in cases in which an object is significant to me, my cognitive system will employ a singular mode of thinking about that object. So, one way to falsify Jeshion's claim is to establish that there are cases of significance combined with generality, rather than singularity.<sup>23</sup>

Another way would be to identify cases of singularity without significance.<sup>24</sup> For example, cases of perception-based singular thought might seem to provide counterexamples to Jeshion's view, since we directly perceive many objects that aren't significant to us. Let me pause to explain why I prefer to pursue counterexamples involving significance combined with generality.

First, my preferred reading of Jeshion takes her claim of biconditional dependence between significance and file-thinking to have limited scope: that is, to apply only to non-perceptual cases.<sup>25</sup> I think this is a more charitable reading of her claim. In her elaboration of the claim that file-thinking constitutes singular thought, Jeshion appeals to the idea that the structure of a non-perceptual mental-file echoes the structure of a perception-based object-file, and that these perceptual cases are the *paradigm* case of singular cognition.<sup>26</sup> This suggests that perceptual cases (in which plans, projects and affective states directed at the object are frequently absent) are surely on Jeshion's radar as instances of singular thought (and paradigm instances at that). Not to construe Jeshion's significance constraint as applying specifically to non-perceptual cases would be to attribute her a basic oversight concerning cases whose singularity she discusses at length, so I'm inclined to interpret her claim about the role of significance in file-formation as a claim about non-perceptual files.

Second, even if we construe Jeshion's significance constraint in an unrestricted way, there are ways for her to defend her view against putative perceptual counterexamples (in which plans, projects and affective states directed at the perceived object are absent). Firstly, Jeshion (2010) in fact explicitly suggests that the objects of perception *are* taken as

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<sup>23</sup> It's worth noting a point here about the general strategy of providing counterexamples to Jeshion's claim of biconditional dependence. In n. 16, I claimed that, since Jeshion conceives of the significance condition as a 'rule of cognition', the language of biconditional dependence is too strong. If the significance condition is the kind of law that admits of exceptions, then the strategy of providing counterexample might seem to miss the mark. However, the kind of case I will rely on is not uncommon or unusual, nor is it a case in which something *defective* is going on. It is a perfectly ordinary and common kind of case in which the mind is functioning well. Thus, it still works to falsify Jeshion's claim, construed as a 'rule of cognition'. Also, it should be noted that Jeshion herself commits to the claim of biconditional dependence, so the claim that biconditional dependence is too strong a relation is in the first instance a problem for her view, not for my strategy in rejecting it.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Genone (2014) pursues this strategy.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted, however, that Genone (2014), for example, also mentions cases of testimony in the absence of significance as potential counterexamples, and that these raise different issues that require separate consideration. I take it that Jeshion would stand by the claim that significance makes the difference between a case of testimony that can serve to transmit singular thought, and one that can't, so she would resist the claim that cases of testimony without significance are counterexamples to her view. But some people may find this implausible. Either way, I do think it's fair to say that testimonial cases do not enjoy the same status as *paradigm* cases of singular thought as perceptual cases, so the claim that some testimonial cases fail to count as singular will be easier for many people to accept. Since I personally take the (admittedly unpopular) view of being skeptical that communication with a proper name is a way of transmitting singular thought about the name's referent, I am not compelled by testimonial counterexamples to Jeshion's view. I will not elaborate my view here but I discuss it further in Goodman (ms.).

<sup>26</sup> See Kahneman, Treisman & Gibbs (1992) & Noles, Scholl & Mitroff (2005) for basic elaboration of the cognitive scientific notion of an object-file.

significant.<sup>27</sup> This suggests we shouldn't assume that *significance* always involves having an emotional connection to the object of thought (although it may in some cases). Secondly, in my view, Jeshion could respond by saying that, in perceptual cases, *attention* plays the role of significance, where this role is played by plans, projects and affective states in non-perceptual cases. Although the position that perceptual-demonstrative thought requires attention involves a substantive commitment, it is certainly defensible.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Jeshion's response would be that significance takes a different *form* in cases of perceptual cognition, but is nonetheless present.<sup>29</sup>

In part for these reasons, and in part because cases of significance combined with generality have until now been overlooked, I will focus on these kinds of cases.

If we are to meaningfully ask if there are cases that combine a pattern of significance directed at an object combined with the phenomenon of descriptive rather than singular thought, the time has come to set in place a working definition of singular thought. This will allow us to be clearer about the required features of my counterexamples.

It is traditional to define singular thoughts in terms of their content: as mental states with singular (as opposed to descriptive) content.<sup>30</sup> This allows for there to be either a descriptive or a singular thought about the same object (predicating the same property of that object), as with two thoughts whose contents are appropriately represented with (1) and (2) below:

- 1)  $\exists x$  [44<sup>th</sup> President (x) & ( $\forall y$ ) (44<sup>th</sup> President (y)  $\rightarrow$  (x = y)) & born in America (x)]
  
- 2) born in America (*Barack Obama*)

Although both thoughts would be about Obama (at the actual world), the thought whose content is (1) would be a descriptive (or general) thought, and the thought whose content is (2) would be singular.<sup>31</sup>

However, even setting aside well-known worries about this definition, it won't serve our current purposes because the notion that a given mental state has content like (1) rather than (2), or *vice versa*, is too abstract to allow us to get traction with particular cases. For any case where I claim that significance combines with generality, a defender of Jeshion might insist this is really a case where the mental state in question doesn't have descriptive content and it will be hard to settle the disagreement.

We can get a more informative criterion by thinking about the distinction we are trying to capture when we assign a mental state with singular vs. general content, or *vice versa*. When we assign a mental-state with a particular content, we are using an abstract object (a content or proposition) to map the intentional or representational features of that state. In the case of descriptive thought, there is largely agreement about what these features are. We assign a

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<sup>27</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Campbell (2002) defends this view.

<sup>29</sup> To be clear, this is not a line Jeshion has in fact taken. It is rather an avenue I suggest is open to her.

<sup>30</sup> This definition entails that singular thoughts are object-dependent. It has lost popularity in the recent literature because of an increasing number of theorists who reject an object-dependent conception of singular thought. For example, see Sainsbury (2005).

<sup>31</sup> Although (1) picks out a particular object at the actual world, it works by generalizing over objects, and is therefore the limiting case of general content.

mental state with descriptive content when it involves employing a set of general concepts, arranged in a certain way such as to net an object or objects, which satisfy the condition laid out by those concepts.<sup>32</sup> This can be put by saying that descriptive thoughts involve thinking about an object *via its properties*, or *merely as the possessor of certain properties*. Singular thought can then be defined negatively by contrast: thinking a singular thought involves thinking of an object not simply as the possessor of properties  $x, y, z$ —or not via its properties—but in some *other way*.

We are asking whether significance can combine with generality. We can now do this by asking if there are cases in which significance combines with the phenomenon of thinking of a thing *merely as the possessor of certain properties*, or *via its properties*.

We can get a case with this structure in view by thinking about cases in which there is a pattern of significance, but this pattern concerns a particular object only *insofar* as it satisfies certain properties. In other words, our interest is in cases in which there are plans, projects, affective states targeted at an object, but only insofar as the object satisfies a certain descriptive condition, or possesses certain properties. If another thing possessed those properties, that thing would be the target of the same plans, projects, and affective states. Here is a case with this structure:

**Counterexample: The aesthetically-motivated collector**

Imagine that I am a collector of ceramics. My interest in ceramics is aesthetically driven. I am interested in acquiring pieces with certain *general* properties like color, shape, texture, I have developed a strong interest in acquiring a piece that meets certain property specification: I'm interested in acquiring the earliest existing example of a particular style of chinese tea cup that is a particular shade of lapis blue, is decorated in a particular traditional floral pattern, has a certain weight and translucency, etc.

My interest in acquiring a piece that meets these specifications has become central to my collecting projects. It dictates patterns of behavior, belief acquisition and emotional responses: I scour antique stores on the weekends looking for the object that meets these specifications. I get enthusiastic and optimistic before a ceramics-finding trip, and disappointed when I return without the thing I'm looking for.

In this case, we can assume I have a whole body of beliefs about *my prized piece*, which I update and revise over time. Given my ongoing interest in finding and acquiring my prized piece it makes sense, both in general, and according to Jeshion's significance condition on files, that my cognitive system is arranged in such a way as to open, maintain and employ a mental file.

But, this seems to be a case in which the object of my thought is significant, but significant precisely *insofar* as it possesses certain properties, or is a certain *kind* of thing. It is important in this example that, despite the *uniqueness* of the description, the pattern of *significance*—the directedness of plans, projects and affective states—tracks the instantiation of a certain set of properties in the world by *whichever* particular thing happens to possess those properties.<sup>33</sup> For example, if I believe there is a piece in Italy that fits my specifications,

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<sup>32</sup> Jeshion (2010: 108) makes this point too.

<sup>33</sup> As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, it is central to the effectiveness of the example that the description has uniqueness.

I form the belief that my prized piece is in Italy, and I plan to acquire that piece. But, if I find out the Italian cup isn't the right color, this particular object is no longer of interest to me. There is stability to my plans, projects and affective states—they remain consistently directed at the object with certain properties—it's just that my beliefs about which thing that is change.

This is a simple kind of case but, according to Jeshion's theory of singular thought, cases like this that combine a pattern of significance concerning an object with generality should not be possible. On her view, when an object is significant, cognition will think singularly about that object. In the example above, the fact that my prized piece is *significant* to me should trigger a singular mode of thinking about it. But, the point of the example is precisely that it combines *significance* with *thinking of a thing only insofar as it is the possessor of certain properties*, and this is the mark of descriptive rather than singular thought.

If this is right, then it's not true that there is biconditional dependence between significance and singular thought.<sup>34</sup> But it remains plausible—indeed, we haven't been given any reason to doubt—that this is a case in which cognition employs a mental-file on the significant object. In cases like this, my claim is that we have file-based *descriptive* thought. This would mean that not all file-based thought is singular, and the MFC is false. The example therefore does more than show that Jeshion's theory of singular thought is flawed—it provides preliminary reason to question the MFC in general.

## V Jeshion's Set 3 Cases

This counterexample forms the basis of my argument against Jeshion, but there is more to be done to orient the example and illustrate what I think we should learn from it, both about Jeshion's account of singular thought and the MFC in general. In this section, I will discuss the status of Jeshion's Set 3 cases in light of my argument. In the next section, I will say what I think we should learn from the aesthetically motivated collector case.

There is an obvious question to be addressed about the relationship between my counterexample case and Jeshion's Set 3 cases: once we have the existence of cases like the aesthetically motivated collector in view, we might ask what the difference really is between this case and Jeshion's set 3 cases. There are two lines to take on this question.

My preferred line is that, once we have seen the structure of cases that combine significance with generality, this in fact casts doubt on Jeshion's description of her Set 3 cases, and motivates us to redescribe her cases as cases of descriptive thought. In other words, my view is that Jeshion's bearprint case, for example, is best understood as a case in which the object is thought about merely as the possessor of certain properties (in this case, as *the bear who is nearby, if there is one*).

The argument for this claim would go by way of thinking more carefully about the *nature* of the pattern of significance attached to the thoughts in this case. My claim would be that the pattern of significance in this case tracks the instantiation of a particular set of properties. All that the family who find (what they think are) fresh bear prints near their campsite care about is that 'the bear who is nearby' is dangerous and might harm them. This

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<sup>34</sup> Nor is it true that, when the mind is functioning well, this biconditional dependence holds. The aesthetically motivated collector case does not seem to be a case in which cognition fails to fulfill any normative rules of cognition.

means that the family's interests, plans, and affective states relate to a *particular* creature only insofar as he possesses certain properties: the properties of being a bear & therefore being dangerous, being nearby, etc. To support this, think about what would happen if it turned out that the maker of the prints was not a bear but a trouble-maker in a bear costume but the family was alerted (say visually) to the fact that there *was* indeed a bear very nearby. In this case, they would not discard their plans to leave the campsite. Their fear would not subside because the maker of the footprints was not really a danger to them. They would not react by thinking or saying, 'oh, I see, there's no need to get off *his* turf'. What is significant to them is *any nearby bear* and, thus, they would still pack up their things and leave. In other words, there would be a continuation of the same set of plans, projects and affective states, which illustrates that these plans and projects concern a particular thing only to the extent that it is the possessor of certain properties. To the extent that the thinker in this case cares about a particular creature, it is *any* particular creature who is a bear, is nearby, and so forth. This suggests we should take seriously the proposal that the mental-file (whose existence and use in cognition is sparked by a pattern of plans, projects and affective states) is a *descriptive file*: It is a file on *whichever* thing satisfies certain properties.<sup>35</sup>

However, the claim that Jeshion's Set 3 cases should be re-described as cases of general thought is not essential to my argument against her view. One could instead maintain that Jeshion's Set 3 cases *are* genuine cases of singular thought, but that there are relevant differences between these cases and my counterexample case. This would require arguing that there are features of the Set 3 cases *other* than the presence of significance that generate singular thought.<sup>36</sup> The point for my purposes is that my argument against cognitivism stands regardless of whether we take issue with Jeshion about the singularity of her Set 3 cases—either way, the biconditional dependence between significance and singularity doesn't go through.

## VI      Morals

So what should we learn from a case like that of the aesthetically motivated collector?

Firstly, as I've already said, the connection Jeshion posits between significance and singularity doesn't hold. There are cases in which significance combines with thinking about an object merely as the possessor of certain properties. In these cases, it is an important feature of the nature of the plans, projects and affective states that constitute a pattern of significance that they are directed at *whichever* object possesses certain properties—the significance in these cases attaches to the instantiation of a certain set of properties (even though these properties form a descriptive condition that is uniquely instantiated).<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, there is a broader moral here about Jeshion's argument and the burden of proof. In her presentation of the argument for cognitivism, Jeshion places a lot of stock in the fact that she can provide a viable non-acquaintance-theoretic alternative to semantic

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<sup>35</sup> I'll say more about what a descriptive file is in §IX, but note that the file being descriptive does *not* entail that it is *individuated* simply by the information in it, or that the content of the thought is specified simply by the information stored in the file.

<sup>36</sup> One possibility would be that the presence of a causal or informational 'trace' of the object of thought is what generates singular thought in many of Jeshion's Set 3 cases (for example, the footprint left by the bear, or the crime scenes caused by Kaczynski in the 'Unabomber' case). See Sawyer (2012) for discussion of this view.

<sup>37</sup> Those familiar with the singular/descriptive distinction will be familiar with the point that definiteness should not be conflated with singularity: that is, a uniquely instantiated description is the limiting case of generality in that it works by generalizing over objects.

instrumentalism by establishing a *genuine cognitive difference* between different putative cases of acquaintanceless singular thought. My argument grants there is a genuine cognitive difference between the cases in Set 2 and Set 3, but disputes that this cognitive difference makes for a difference between singular and descriptive thought. In §III, I claimed that, if her argument is to succeed, Jeshion must discharge the burden of showing that the genuine cognitive difference she identifies between the Set 2 and Set 3 cases ought to be construed as a semantic difference—in particular, as the difference between singular and descriptive thought. I claim that she has not discharged this burden. By setting in place a working definition of the singular/descriptive thought distinction—as the distinction between thinking of an object merely as the possessor of certain properties and thinking of it in some other way—I have tried to show that, to the extent that we have an independent grip on the distinction between singular and general thought, we have reason to think Jeshion’s significance condition does *not* distinguish singular from general thought.

Thirdly, the fact that significance does not govern singularity does not mean that significance does not govern the use of mental-files. If it is plausible that cognition opens a mental-file iff a pattern of significance gives it cause to do so—and I agree with Jeshion that this is plausible—this simply places pressure on the MFC: in particular, on the claim that all file-based thought is singular.<sup>38</sup> Given that the counterexample to the connection Jeshion posits between significance and singular thought is *not* a counterexample to the connection she posits between significance and mental-files, and given the overall plausibility of the latter connection, we should at least take seriously the view that some file-based thought is descriptive thought, and the MFC is false.

## VII Clarification and Responses

At this stage, I would like to clarify my argument by addressing some possible responses.

Firstly, there may be a temptation to think Jeshion could respond to my counterexample by appealing to the idea that ‘thinking with files’ is *definitional* of singular thought. The response would go as follows. To the extent that it is plausible that my aesthetically motivated collector case (and Jeshion’s Set 3 cases) involves the use of mental-file, this is simply what it means for it to be a case of singular thought—there is no *space* for my claim that this is a case of general thought, because file-based thought is by definition singular.

It is important that this response is not available to Jeshion, and also that she correct to rule it out. The move is unavailable because Jeshion explicitly says that the claim that one thinks a singular thought iff one’s thought is file-based is not a definitional claim, but rather as a substantive one about the empirical underpinnings of singular thought (Jeshion, 2010: 130). Furthermore, she is right not to take on the MFC as a definitional claim. If she were to simply *define* singular thought as thinking with files this would come dangerously close to simply changing the topic, rather than proposing a substantive new theory of singular thought.

If one were to appeal to the MFC as a definition, we could reasonably ask why we should *redefine* the notion of singular thought and insist that singular thought simply *is* (by definition) thinking with mental-files, when this only weakens our explanatory resources, or

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<sup>38</sup> It might remain true that all singular thought is file-based (although it’s not the case that all file-based thought is singular). In fact, this is my view.

makes them courser. The point here is that, as theorists, we already *have* a notion that allows us to see what is distinctive about cognition that involves certain forms of information clustering, storage and update, and this notion is one that allows us to characterize the kinds of cases Jeshion pinpoints, and one that will also allow her to make her point about the important role of significance in cognition. This is the notion of a *mental-file*. If turns out that some cases appropriately theorized with *this* notion are also *descriptive* rather than *singular* (as my counterexample suggests) then we are left with two dimensions along which the nature of a mental state may vary—file-based vs. non-file-based, and singular vs. descriptive—which don't always align with one another. But, if we simply *redefine* 'singular thought' as file-thinking, we let the distinction between thinking of a thing *merely via its properties* vs. in some *other* way drop out of our theorizing altogether. We haven't been presented with a good reason to do this and, if we thought this distinction was interesting and informative for independent reasons—as many philosophers have—then we have reason not to let it drop out of our theoretical picture.

Secondly, one might worry that, by rejecting of the connection Jeshion posits between significance and singularity, we leave the *intuitive* difference between the Set 2 and Set 3 cases unaccounted for. Jeshion's theory is intended to do justice to our intuitions about singularity. If we reject Jeshion's significance constraint, what are we to make of the intuition that the Set 3 cases are singular, whereas the Set 2 cases are not?

First, considering this objection gives us an opportunity to reflect on the proper place of intuitions about singularity. Firstly, for what it is worth, I don't share the intuition that there is a difference *with respect to singularity* between the Set 2 and Set 3 cases. And, if the intuition is shaky in the first place, this is at least a *pro tanto* reason not to place too much weight on it. Secondly, even if others share Jeshion's intuitions, they still don't bear enough weight to be used as a response to my counterexample. *Singular thought* is a theoretical, not intuitive or ordinary-language, category. Jeshion herself admits that intuitions about theoretical categories like singular thought are 'shot through with theory' and subject to revision on the basis of theory (Jeshion, 2010: 112). To construct our theory on the basis of an argument that shows us that significance and singularity come apart, despite an *initial* intuition to the contrary is therefore a legitimate theoretical move, even by Jeshion's lights.

Second, and most importantly, my claim does not in fact leave the intuitive difference between the Set 2 and Set 3 cases unaccounted for, it just accounts for it differently. There is indeed an intuition of *difference* between the Set 2 and Set 3 cases—just not one that tracks singularity. The intuition can be conceived as an intuition of *cognitive difference*. I have granted both that Jeshion has pinpointed a genuine cognitive difference between the cases, and also that this lines up with the use of mental-files and this in itself accounts for the intuition of difference between the cases.

### VIII The Notion of Singular Thought

Considering a final possible objection to my argument, clarifies some important issues about the notion of singular thought and where the burden of proof lies.

It is important that my argument against Jeshion (and the MFC) works by fixing a basic working definition of the distinction between singular and descriptive thought, and showing that the presence of a pattern of significance does *not* as Jeshion claims make for the difference between general and singular thought about a particular object, even though it

might make for the difference between thought that employs a mental-file and thought that does not. It may be objected, however, that although there are cases in which significance combines with the phenomenon of thinking of an individual merely as the possessor of certain properties, this overlooks the intuition that, in many such case—for example, my aesthetically motivated collector case or Jeshion’s bearprint case—the thoughts involve treating an object *as an individual*, or thinking of the object *as such*. For example, here is Jeshion, talking about the singularity of her bearprint case:

‘... the bearprint case resonates as singular because I begin to worry and undertake deliberation, planning and action in connection to that bear. The affective component creates significance for me, which in turn inspires action. Consequently, my mind treats that bear *as an individual*...’ [italics mine] (Jeshion, 2010: 126-7)

I take it that Jeshion’s appeal to the mind treating an object *as an individual* is meant to be a gloss on what is distinctive about singular thought, and to illustrate why it is compelling to think this case (and presumably others involving significance) should be classified as instances of singular thought. The objection to my argument, then, is that *singular thought* is thought in which the mind treats an object *as an individual*. Adopting *this* as the definition of singular thought—instead of my working definition—entails that significance *is* as Jeshion claims that which distinguishes descriptive thoughts about a particular thing from singular thoughts about a particular thing: when objects are significant, the mind treats them *as individuals*.

I want to respond to this suggestion at length because this way of talking about singular thought is relatively common, and is often used to harness intuitions about singularity. In my view, this is a mistake (not just of Jeshion, but of the literature more generally). My view is that the idea of thought in which an object is treated *as an individual* cannot be used to pinpoint what is distinctive about singular thought. Intuitions in some given case that an object is thought of *as an individual* therefore cannot support the claim that the case is an instance of singular thought.

Firstly, the idea that there is a clear contrast between thoughts in which an object is *treated as a particular* and those in which it is not is misleading at best. Appeals to it either fail to target a workable notion of singularity, or amount simply to shorthand for the idea of a thought that involves thinking of an object, but not merely as the possessor of certain properties (so will tell against Jeshion’s position). Some examples of the attempt to spell out this idea illustrate my point.

When it is appealed to in the literature, the idea of thinking about a thing as a particular, is often spelled out by using Quine’s example of the two possible things it could mean to want to own sloop.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, one could simply desire to own any sloop—that is, one could desire relief from sloopless-ness. On the other, there could be a particular sloop one desires to own. In the first instance, the desire is targeted toward *any* object that is a sloop. In the second, the desire is targeted toward a *particular* thing. But, imagine a case in which some sailing enthusiast has a desire to buy a traditional sloop, which is twenty feet long, with a cherry wood hull, and a jib of a particular light blue color. Imagine in fact that

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<sup>39</sup> See Jeshion (2002), who appeals to the same contrast using a different example.

the description of properties required by the desire is so detailed that there is only one sloop on earth that satisfies it. Should we say in this case that there is a particular sloop that our sailing enthusiast desires? In a sense, there is, and in a sense there is not. In a perfectly straightforward sense, it is true that there is in this case a particular sloop that I desire to own. This sense of ‘thinking about a particular thing’ is, however, surely *not* the sense intended with the idea of treating an object *as a particular* because, on this conception, ‘singularity’ would come to no more than the idea that a thought narrowed down to just one object. But, this would not allow for the distinction—which is the very heart of the singular/descriptive distinction—between specificity and singularity.

So what meaning can we affix to the idea of a thought that treats its object ‘as an individual’? The distinction between thinking about a thing *merely as the possessor of certain properties* or in some other way *gives* us a possible meaning for this idea, but not one that can be used to defend Jeshion’s position or the MFC, for we have already seen that, if *this* is the criterion in question, we are *not* in a position to insist that significance triggers the mind to treat the object of thought as an individual.

Another suggestion is that what it means for the mind to treat an object *as an individual* is for one to think of it in a way such that its *identity*—it being the particular object it is—matters. But, to illustrate that the idea of thinking about a thing in such a way that its identity matters cannot be used as a successful criterion for singular thought (rather than merely definite thought), consider the following example. Assuming that the identity of a particular number is determined by its place in the number line, imagine that I think ‘the successor of three is an even number’. In such a case, I have thought about the number four in such a way that its identity matters—I have picked it out by the very feature that makes it the particular thing that it is, or by the feature that individuates it across worlds—but I have also picked it out by description.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, we should not think that Jeshion could respond to my argument by appealing to a distinct definition of singular thought as thought that treats an object *as an individual*, or thinking of it in such a way that its *identity matters*. To the extent that treating an object ‘as an individual’ involves thinking of it, but not via its properties, this definition is not distinct to mine and does not tell in favor of cognitivism or the MFC. To the extent that this intuition about thoughts that treat their objects as individuals is meant as an *independent* criterion for singular thought, it seems to involve a conflation of singularity and definiteness. So intuitions that an object is thought about *as an individual*, do not show that such cases are singular.

There is a broader point to be made here. As I’ve said, my argument works by holding fixed the theoretical notion of singular thought, and illustrating that both significance and file-thinking come apart from this notion. It is open to my opponent to question the working definition of singular thought I have supplied, but there are some constraints on this strategy. Firstly, as the discussion in this section has shown, the alternative conception must provide a distinct definition that has the resources to distinguish singularity from

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<sup>40</sup> An anonymous referee asked if Jeshion might be construed as claiming that thinking of a thing as an individual *plus* satisfying the significance condition could be jointly sufficient to think a singular thought about that thing. However, this is not Jeshion’s claim. In the passage cited, she relies on the idea of *thinking of a thing as an individual* to mark or define the notion of singular thought. Her claim is that fulfillment of the significance condition is what distinguishes cases in which this idea applies from cases in which it doesn’t. She does not want to claim that, among the class of cases in which the object is thought of as an individual, those in which it is also significant are the singular ones.

definiteness, otherwise it amounts to denying the singular/descriptive distinction, not elaborating it. The singular/descriptive distinction is a distinction between *two* ways a thought can concern a particular individual. If one's notion of singularity is satisfied by any thought that narrows down to one, then this is to deny this distinction, not to provide a definition of it. Secondly, the strategy must avoid simply changing the topic. For example, a proponent of the MFC must be willing (as Jeshion is) to defend the claim that our existing notion of singular thought is co-extensive with the phenomenon of file-thinking. If they merely claim that what they *mean* by 'singular thought' is *file-thinking*, then they have not provided an alternative conception of singular thought, but have illicitly replaced it with another category. One could of course justify *discarding* the category of singular thought on the basis that the original notion is theoretically useless, unmotivated or confused, but this move would require argument.<sup>41</sup> In the meantime, I am justified in rejecting cognitivism and questioning the MFC on the basis that our existing notion of singular thought does not line up with significance or file-use.

## IX Descriptive File-based Thought

I have argued that the connection Jeshion posits between significance and singularity doesn't hold but, since significance *does* plausibly line up with file-use, we have preliminary reason to question the MFC. This argument involves the claim that there are file-based descriptive thoughts. Although I lack space here for a full argument against the MFC, it is worth saying a little more about the possibility of file-based descriptive thoughts, because readers familiar with the notion of a mental-file may be inclined to think descriptivism about *any* file-based thoughts is inconsistent with what is constitutive of the notion of a mental-file. Some brief remarks about why descriptivism about *some* file-based thoughts is in fact consistent with the file-theoretic framework are therefore in order.<sup>42</sup>

It is common to dismiss the notion of descriptive file-based thought because of two central features of mental-files. Firstly, files cannot be individuated by the information contained in them. A file can persist through new information being added to or discarded from the file. My file on Barack Obama may once have contained the information 'grew up in Chicago'. When this information was discarded and replaced with 'grew up in Hawaii', this information-change was consistent with the persistence of the file. Secondly, a mental-file can contain false information without this affecting what it is about. For example, if my Obama file contained, 'grew up in Chicago' this would not change the fact that the file was about Obama, despite the fact that Obama did not grow up in Chicago. This entails both that the file's referent is not determined simply by the entirety of the information stored in it, and also that the semantic content of thoughts employing the file isn't given by a conjunction of this information. The inference here is analogous to Kripke's (1980) 'semantic argument' against the claim that the meaning of a name is a description. But, it does not in fact entail the conclusion that the semantic content of all file-based thoughts is singular. Granting that possible persistence through information-change and referential

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<sup>41</sup> Jeshion (2014) in fact argues for a related view, but this view is not expressed or alluded to in her earlier papers on cognitivism, which is the topic of this paper. My view is that the notion of singular thought is coherent and theoretically useful.

<sup>42</sup> A full account of descriptive files and an extended argument against the MFC, which expands on the discussion in this section, is given in Goodman (2014).

success despite false information are constraints on *all* files, this does not rule the existence of what I call ‘descriptive files’. A *descriptive file* is not individuated by the entirety of the information contained in it, nor is its semantic content given by a conjunction of this information. Rather, it is a file for which there is a particular description that plays a privileged, governing role with respect to the file, which goes beyond its metasemantics. The ‘governing’ description for a descriptive file plays the roles of fixing the referent of the file, serving to determine which information can be added to the file, and determining individuation and persistence conditions for the file over time. Thus, the thoughts employing the file are descriptive—they involve thinking of an object merely as the possessor of certain properties specified by the governing description—but the central constraints on file-hood are not violated. In my view, cases like the aesthetically motivated collector case and Jeshion’s Set 3 cases involve descriptive files.

This very brief discussion is clearly not intended as a full argument against the MFC or a full account of descriptive file-based thought. It is however meant to show that my argument in this paper should not be dismissed on the basis that the idea of file-based descriptive thought does not make sense. I have given a sketch of reasons to think, *prima facie*, that descriptivism about some file-based thought is consistent with the file-theoretic framework. This means that the truth of the MFC should not simply be assumed and the kind of argument I have given, which attempts to pull apart the notion of file-thinking from that of singular thought by showing there are reasons to think they are not coextensive, is a legitimate move in the debate, to be taken seriously.

### Conclusion

I will finish by restating the conclusions I want to draw in this paper.

The connection Jeshion draws between significance and singular thought does not hold, so cognitivism is false. However, this does not mean that significance does not align with the use of mental-files (at least for non-perceptual, long-term mental-files used to track individuals across contexts). If it is plausible that cognition opens and employs a mental-file iff a pattern of significance is in place, this does not serve as a defense of cognitivism, but rather serves to put pressure on the MFC. Thus, the larger message we should draw from the connection Jeshion pinpoints between significance and file-use is not, as she thinks, that we should adopt a ‘cognitivist’ version of the MFC, but rather that we have preliminary reason to question the MFC—that is, preliminary reason to think some file-based thoughts are descriptive, and that the notion of a mental-file (while it may be a legitimate and important tool for theorizing the mind) should not be given the role of theorizing the notion of singular thought. File-thinking does not distinguish singular from descriptive thought, because some file-based thought is descriptive. I have not given a full argument against the MFC in this paper, or a full account of the category, which my argument suggests to exist, of file-based descriptive thoughts. But I have given an argument against Jeshion’s theory of singular thought that has the larger implication of giving us reason to question the MFC. I have also provided a preliminary explanation (in §IX) of why the idea of file-based descriptive thoughts should not be dismissed. My argument is therefore of interest for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that, by highlighting the role of *significance* in cognition, Jeshion hasn’t given us reason adopt cognitivism, she has rather given us reason buck the current trend in the literature and question the MFC. Secondly, by suggesting there are descriptive

file-based thoughts, my argument points in the direction of further work to be done in the theory of mental-files: the work of giving an account of *descriptive files*, and of explaining how they fit into the file-theoretic framework as a whole.

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