

## TITLE

# **The Band of Theseus. Social Individuals and Mental Files**

## ABSTRACT

Social individuals are social entities having a distinctive individuality, often signaled by the use of a proper name to designate them. This paper proposes an account of social individuals based on the notion of a mental file, understood as a repository of information about a single individual. First, I consider a variant of the puzzle of the ship of Theseus in which the object having problematic identity conditions is a social individual, namely a rock band. Then, I argue that we can figure out such identity conditions by considering the mental files concerning this band. In conclusion, I outline a version of social constructionism according to which the existence of social individuals like bands depends on mental files about them.

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## TEXT

This is a paper about social individuals. Examples of social individuals are basketball teams such as the San Antonio Spurs or rock bands such as the Rolling Stones. I borrow the notion of an individual from Peter Strawson (1959), who introduces it developing Aristotle's notion of a primary substance. An individual is an entity that has identity conditions that can allow us to identify it at a certain time and possibly to reidentify it later. Paradigmatic cases of individuals are concrete particulars, i.e. entities having a precise place in space at a certain time, for example a human being such as Meryl Streep or a material artifact such as the Empire State Building. Still, Strawson shows that the notion of an individual is broader than that of a concrete particular. There may be individuals that are not concrete particulars.

A useful clue when recognizing individuals is, to put it with Strawson, that they often “bear what one is strongly inclined to call a proper name” (1959, 231). A proper name is a linguistic device that, in subject-predicate sentences, normally functions only as a subject (rather than as a

predicate). ‘San Antonio Spurs’ and ‘Rolling Stones’ are linguistic devices of this sort. This suggests that the entities they designate can be treated as individuals, and more precisely, as *social* individuals. In this paper, I will investigate the ontological specificity of social individuals, arguing that their identity conditions depend on social practices. More specifically, I will argue that the identity conditions of social individuals depend on the sharing of *mental files* on the part of the members of a community.

The notion of a mental file is the psychological counterpart of the ontological notion of an individual. In short, mental files are the mental devices by means of which a thinking subject gathers information about individuals. Strawson himself prefigures the notion of a mental file when he writes: “Imagine a man as, in part, a machine for receiving and storing knowledge [...] The machine contains cards, one card for each cluster of identifying knowledge in his possession” (1974, 56).

In this paper, I will investigate the functioning of the mental files that we use to store information about social individuals. I will do so with the aim of shedding some light on the nature of social individuals themselves.

In § 1, I will discuss the classic metaphysical puzzle concerning the identity of the ship of Theseus, in order to then propose a modified version of it that concerns the identity of a social individual: viz. the band of Theseus. This imaginary social individual will be my case study. In §§ 2—5, I will exploit the notion of a mental file in order to provide the band of Theseus with appropriate identity conditions. By relying on the analysis of this case study, in §§ 6—10 I propose a mental-file-based version of social constructionism that stresses the dependence of social individuals on the sharing of mental files about them.

1. The ship of Theseus is a thought experiment that we owe to Plutarch: “The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their places, in so much that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same” (Clough 1859, 21). Hobbes (1655) complicated the puzzle by wondering what would happen if the original planks were used to build a second ship: which ship, if either, would be the original ship of Theseus?

This thought experiment has been widely discussed in contemporary metaphysics (see e.g. Wasserman 2015, for a basic survey). Here, I will discuss a modified version of the thought experiment, which concerns *social individuals*, i.e. social entities that are not kinds but rather specimens of a kind. Examples of real social individuals are Arsenal Football Club (a specimen of

the kind ‘football team’) and Status Quo (a specimen of the kind ‘rock band’). Here, I will use an imaginary rock band as a case study for my inquiry in the identity of social individuals. I will suppose that Theseus is the singer of the rock band The Ship, which he started together with a guitarist, a bassist, and a drummer. After a while the guitarist leaves the band and is replaced; then, the bassist and the drummer are also replaced; finally, Theseus himself is replaced. Furthermore, we can add a Hobbesian complication by supposing that Theseus and his former partners decide to start a new band called The Shop.

Does The Ship remain the same band even if all its original members have been replaced? Or does The Ship cease to exist when its original members leave, and then go back into existence with a new name when The Shop is created? It is very tempting to claim that The Ship keeps existing even if all its members are replaced, and that The Shop is a new band, which is distinct from The Ship, in spite of the fact that the present members of The Shop are the former members of The Ship. The case can be compared to that of a basketball team that hires all the players of another basketball team, and yet the two teams remain distinct entities. In general, it seems intuitive to claim that the identity of a social individual like a band or a team is quite independent of its members (for some reasons that support this intuition, see Simmel 1896-1897; Smith 1999; Epstein 2015, chap. 10).

Nevertheless, I do not want to rely on such intuitions in this paper, since social practices might make room for exceptions to what such intuitions suggest. There is another intuition that I take to be more basic and more compelling, i.e., that social individuals depend on *social practices*. These are to be understood as networks of convergent attitudes and behaviors, shared understandings, and basic, often unstated, presuppositions. In this sense, social practices differ from institutions since the former are much less formalized and much more implicit than the latter (cf. Brandom 1994, chap. 1).

Thus, we have a way of solving puzzles about social individuals, namely, looking into the social practices on which they depend. This is the strategy I will adopt in what follows. More specifically, I will argue that we can address puzzles such as that of the band of Theseus by appealing to the notion of a mental file and by considering the role that mental files play in social practices.

2. A mental file is a mental particular that functions as a vehicle of singular thought. Robin Jeshion defines it as “a repository of information that the agent takes to be about a single individual” (2010, 131). In comparison with the general notion of a representation, the notion of a mental file has a couple of distinctive features.

First, a mental file, as a vehicle of singular thought, is *about individual entities*, whereas representations can be about whatever entities, including properties or relations. This specificity of

mental files also allows us to distinguish them from concepts – or, if one prefers, to treat mental files as a distinctive species of the genus ‘concept’. In this sense, mental files play in thought a role similar to the role that proper names play in languages. Yet mental files, which are *mental* devices, are not to be confused with proper names, which are *linguistic* devices (see § 5 below).<sup>1</sup>

Second, a mental file has a *distinctive dual structure*, which includes information about an individual, on the one hand, and a relation to that individual, on the other. Thus, a mental file allows us both to store information about an individual and to enjoy an actual relation to that individual. In a limit case, a mental file just provides us with the impression of enjoying an actual relation to an individual; in this case, “The thought fails to have a singular content, though phenomenologically it feels as if it had a singular content” (Recanati 2013, 4).

The functioning of a mental file, unlike that of a representation, involves the existence of the individual it is about – or, at least, the supposition of the existence of this individual, i.e., the treating of this individual as if it were an existing one. Paradigmatic mental files are those about individuals to whom one can be causally connected, namely, individuals that one can perceive (e.g. the Tour Eiffel) or individuals that one can know through reliable sources (e.g. Julius Caesar). This is the proper function of a mental file in our cognitive life: it gathers information about an existing individual to whom we are related through a reliable causal link or chain. However, philosophers like Robin Jeshion (2010) and Kenneth Taylor (2010) have argued that one can also token a mental file about an individual to whom one is not causally connected but that is of some significance to oneself. Thus, we can use mental files not only to gather information about individuals that already exist, but also to treat some purported individuals as if they existed (cf. Taylor 2010, § 4). Such a creative power of mental files is significantly strengthened when several subjects share their mental files about a certain purported individual, as it is, for example, in the case of Santa Claus. According to Taylor, this is “a distinctively human capacity that lies at the very foundation of our ability to produce culture and social life” (2010, 95).

3. For what concerns our ability to produce culture and social life, the relevant mental files are those that François Recanati calls “public files”, i.e. “files shared by distinct individuals in a community” (2012, 205). Just as a private mental file is a repository of information that *the agent* takes to be

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1 From a computationalist perspective, one might say that mental files correspond to names in the language of thought (cf. Fodor 2008, 92-100). However, the use of mental files I am doing here – in the wake of scholars like Strawson (1974), Jeshion (2010), Taylor (2010) and Recanati (2012) – is not committed to computationalism about the human mind (that is, to the claim that mental processes *are* computations). I just exploit the notion of a mental file in order to effectively model and describe some cognitive facts about singular thought that seem to be especially relevant for what concerns the existence of social individuals. Thanks to a reviewer for leading me to clarify the connections between the notion of a mental file and Fodor’s account.

about a single individual, a public mental file is a repository of information that *the community* takes to be about a single individual. While private mental file is a *descriptive* notion at the *psychological* level, public mental file is a *normative* notion at the *social* level. More specifically, I conceive of a public file as an epistemic norm by which the private mental files of the community's members ought to abide. In this sense, a public file is a normative construct that arises from private mental files through social interactions, and from then on bears upon the psychological uses of these files. Just as a private mental file stores the information one *takes* to be about a certain individual, a public mental file stores the core information one *ought to take* to be about a certain individual if one wants to count as a well-informed member of one's community.

In other words, I conceive of public files as entries of the implicit encyclopedia constituted by the *understandings* about individual entities that are *shared* in a certain community. Since *shared understandings* are among the components of social practices (see § 1 above), the notion of an implicit encyclopedia allows us to model the functioning of these practices in relation to the existence of social individuals.

I am speaking here of an invisible encyclopedia, which corresponds to the totality of the shared understandings about individuals within a certain community. However, encyclopedias strictly understood (for instance, *Wikipedia* or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) are good approximations of such an implicit encyclopedia, which they try to make explicit as much as possible. Likewise, written dictionaries (for instance, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* or the *Oxford English Dictionary*) can be seen as good approximations of the invisible implicit dictionary on which the existence of the words of the language spoken in a certain community arguably depends. As this implicit dictionary can be made partially explicit through written dictionaries, so the implicit encyclopedia can be made partially explicit through written encyclopedias – or also, in certain specific domains, through more specific documents such as registers or database.

This *encyclopedia-dictionary analogy* helps us to clarify an important point concerning shared knowledge. It is not necessary that any speaker of a certain linguistic community actually knows all the entries of the implicit dictionary of that community (or the whole content of any entry). This would be a too strong requirement for the existence of the words of that language. In fact, an agreement within the linguistic community about the normative role of such an implicit dictionary is sufficient. The same holds for the implicit encyclopedia whose entries are public files. It is not necessary that any member of the community actually knows all the entries of the implicit encyclopedia (or the whole content of any entry). An agreement within the community about the normative role of such an implicit encyclopedia is sufficient.

Furthermore, the encyclopedia-dictionary analogy allows us to highlight the relation between

the public file as a normative construct and the private files as psychological devices which the public file bears upon. For what concerns the implicit dictionary, it is not necessary that all the speakers of a language have in mind exactly the same meaning of a certain word: it suffices that they acknowledge that there is a linguistic norm (namely, an entry in the implicit dictionary) that governs the uses of that word. Likewise, for what concerns the implicit encyclopedia, it is not necessary that all the members of the community store exactly the same information about a certain individual: it suffices that they acknowledge that there is some core information (namely, an entry in the implicit encyclopedia) that one should know about that individual if one wants to count as a well-informed member of the community. In this sense, both language and culture rest upon an acknowledgment of a basic normative framework within a community.

Finally, the encyclopedia-dictionary analogy helps us to outline the social processes through which a new public file can be created, i.e. a new entry can be added to the implicit encyclopedia. These processes are sorts of negotiations similar to those through which a new word is introduced into a language. More specifically, a new word can be introduced into a language either in a “bottom up” way, viz. as emerging from regularities of uses, or in a “top down” way, viz. as descending from the decision of some representatives (this happens especially for technical terms). Likewise, a new entry can be added to the implicit encyclopedia in both these ways.

4. The implicit dictionary establishes a correspondence between its entries and the words of a certain language, namely an *entry-word correspondence*. Likewise, the implicit encyclopedia establishes a correspondence between its entries and social individuals like bands, namely an *entry-entity correspondence*.<sup>2</sup> In this section, I will exploit the entry-entity correspondence in order to figure out the identity conditions of social individuals like bands. In doing so, I shall stay neutral on what makes the entry-entity correspondence possible. In section § 6, instead, I shall discuss a stronger thesis, which traces the entry-entity correspondence back to the dependence of social individuals on public mental files about them – in short, the entity rests upon the entry.

Given the entry-entity correspondence, the creation of a new band *X* involves the addition of a new entry “*X is a band such that...*” in the implicit encyclopedia. Then, the life of *X* may involve updates in this encyclopedia entry, i.e., filling in the ellipsis in “*X is a band such that...*” with new pieces of information. Finally, the death of *X* involves changing this entry in the following way: “*X was a band such that...*” (i.e., turning an ‘it *is*’ entry into an ‘it *was*’ entry). Call this ‘the closure of a public file’.

That being the case, we can conceive of the public mental file about The Ship as an entry in

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2 I want to thank the reviewers for leading me to figure out both the encyclopedia-dictionary analogy and the entry-entity correspondence.

the implicit encyclopedia that corresponds to the shared understandings of the relevant community about this rock band. When The Ship is brought into existence as a new band, a new mental file is created that states ‘The Ship is a band such that...’. As long as The Ship keeps existing in spite of its changes, its corresponding mental file is simply updated with new pieces of information: e.g. the information that the former guitarist left the band and was replaced by a new one. Finally, when The Ship ceased to exist, the structure of its public file would be changed by replacing the opening statement ‘The Ship *is* a band such that...’ with the statement ‘The Ship *was* a band such that...’, thereby preventing updates concerning future happenings.

In this framework, the puzzle of the band of Theseus can be solved by consulting our public files. Let us suppose that the guitarist of The Ship leaves the band and is replaced by a new one. Does The Ship remain the same band? The answer is to be found in the implicit encyclopedia. If the encyclopedia entry for The Ship is simply updated, then the band remains the same social individual. If, instead, this entry undergoes a closure and a new entry is created, then the former band ceases to exist and a new band is brought into existence.

According to our social practices concerning bands, the mere replacement of a member does not normally lead to the death of the old band and to the creation of a new one. Nevertheless, in my account this possibility is not ruled out in principle. It may be that, for a certain band, a member was so important that her replacement leads the community to treat the former band as gone out of existence, thereby conceiving of the band after her replacement as a brand-new band. In this case, the encyclopedia entry about the band becomes a closed entry (i.e., an ‘it *was*’ entry), and a new encyclopedia entry (i.e., an ‘it *is*’ entry) is added for the new band. If this is really what the community has established, then I am keen to admit that in this case we have a brand-new band.

The Hobbesian case of the two competing bands, namely The Ship and The Shop, can be addressed in the same way. If the formation of The Shop by the former members of The Ship involves the creation of a new specific encyclopedia entry for The Shop, then the latter should be conceived of as a new band distinct from The Ship. This seems to be the simplest, most elegant and most reasonable way in which a community can deal with cases of this sort. However, in principle, it may be that the community reacts to the formation of The Shop by updating the encyclopedia entry for The Ship with the information that, at a certain time, all its current members were replaced by the former members and the band was renamed The Shop. This leads to the creation of a new encyclopedia entry, say The Ship\*, for the band that was The Ship before the making of The Shop. This may sound weird, but if this is what the community has established, one should acknowledge that the ontological condition of these bands has changed in this way.

As David Wiggins (2001, 95-99) puts it in his analysis of the classic puzzle of the ship of Theseus, at a certain time there may be two (or even more) “candidates” to the condition of the ship

of Theseus. If this is the case, then, according to Wiggins, the actual ship of Theseus is “the best candidate”. For what concerns social individuals, I argue that the best candidate is the one that the community chooses by updating its implicit encyclopedia.<sup>3</sup>

Another possible way in which the community can solve the conflict between The Ship and The Shop is by means of what I call the *typification* of the social individual. So far, I have conceived of social individuals like bands as *particular* entities, i.e. entities that, unlike universals, cannot have multiple instances at a given moment. Most, if not all, rock bands are in fact particular entities. Nevertheless, it may be that a certain community starts treating a certain band as a universal, namely a *type*, which has at least two instances, and in principle even more. In this case, the creation of The Shop would lead to a special update in the encyclopedia entry for The Ship, which becomes a type of band, say THE SHIP, having two particular tokens, The Ship and The Shop (for a similar solution to the standard case of the ship of Theseus as a material artifact, see Angelone 2015).

Even though some ways of updating an encyclopedia seem to be simpler, more elegant and more reasonable than others, in principle it remains up to the community to decide how to modify its implicit encyclopedia in any given circumstance. The public mental files warrant the correspondence between the shared understandings of a community and the social individuals the files are about. I think this is an advantage of my account, inasmuch as it does not force us to revise the shared understandings of a community for the sake of a given metaphysical framework.

From this perspective, a limit case is one in which the community does not find an agreement about one precise way of changing the implicit encyclopedia. For example, we can imagine that an important part of the community keeps treating The Ship as the same band while it treats The Shop as a new band, but another part, which is equally important, does the opposite. If no cultural negotiation within the community is successful, the puzzle of the band of Theseus cannot be solved and the identity of these social *things* remains indeterminate (that is why I use, here, the term ‘thing’ instead of ‘individual’; cf. Lowe 1998, chap. 3). Since the identity of social individuals like bands corresponds to the shared understandings of the relevant community, and if such understandings are not shared because of unbridgeable disagreements, then – within the scope of that community – there is no fact of the matter as to what concerns the identity of the social things at stake. In cases like this, the identity of the social things remains indeterminate since the ontological procedure by means of which the community should establish such an identity fails irremediably to deliver a

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3 I am assuming, here, that all candidates are proper candidates, that is, in the case under examination, they are all proper instances of the kind of bands. The question whether a certain social individual does or does not count as a proper instance of a certain kind goes beyond the scope on this paper. However, after developing my account of social individuals in §§ 6—8, in § 9 I shall connect it to an account of the social kinds to which they belong.



result.

5. Given that mental files play a role in thought similar to that played by proper names in language, the introduction of a new proper name is often a significant clue that a new public file or encyclopedia entry (and, correspondingly, a new social individual) has been created. Yet, public files are not to be confused with proper names. In principle, a proper name is just another piece of information that can be stored in the encyclopedia entry.

Thus, we can conceive of a variant of the Hobbesian thought experiment according to which the band reunion of Theseus and his friends is named The Ship, instead of The Shop, in spite of the fact that there is already another band with the same name (i.e., that constituted by the substitutes of Theseus and his friends). In fact, this does not prevent the community from treating Theseus's band as a brand-new band, and creating a new encyclopedia entry for it. The implicit encyclopedia, just as written encyclopedias like *Wikipedia* or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, can effectively disambiguate distinct entries that share the same name. Proper names often help us in individuating encyclopedia entries, but they just give us clues, not absolute certainties.

Sometimes proper names may be misleading (cf. Fodor 2008, 77-78). The use of the same name may provide one with the appearance of just one encyclopedia entry where there are in fact two entries (see for example the case of two distinct bands named Kaleidoscope – a case discussed in Petersen 2015). Likewise, the use of two different names (for instance, 'The Beatles' and 'The Fab Four') may provide one with the appearance of two encyclopedia entries where in fact there is just one entry.

6. In discussing the case of the band of Theseus, I have made a claim about *the identity conditions* of social individuals such as bands. I have argued that we can solve puzzles about the identity of such individuals by looking into the shared understandings of the relevant communities, which can be modeled through the notion of a public mental file. I call this the Austere Version (AV) of the mental-file-based account of social individuals:

(AV) The identity conditions of social individuals like bands can be found by looking into the public mental files of the relevant community about these individuals.

However, this account can be strengthened up in order to turn it into a fully-fledged version of social constructionism about social individuals. Here, I follow Ron Mallon's basic characterization of social constructionism: "If there is any core idea of social constructionism, it is that *some object or objects* are caused or controlled by *social or cultural factors* rather than natural factors." (2013,

1, my emphasis). In the account I am going to develop, the “objects” at stake are *social individuals* and the “factors” that bear upon them are *public mental files*.

More specifically, (AV) can lead us to social constructionism if we strengthen it in this way:

(AV\*) No identity conditions for a social individual like a band without a public mental file about it.

Then, we can combine (AV\*) with Quine’s (1969) “no entity without identity” principle, considered in the specific form “no individual entity without identity conditions” (cf. Lowe 1998, chap. 3, § 13). This leads us to what I call the Bold Version (BV) of the mental-file-based account of social individuals:

(BV) No existence of a social individual like a band without a public mental file about it.

So far, the main purpose of this paper has been to solve the puzzle of the band of Theseus through the introduction of (AV). However, (BV) is a possible development of (AV) that is worth exploring, inasmuch as this can lead us to a promising version of social constructionism about social individuals.

According to (BV), public mental files are not just a helpful tool to figure out the identity conditions of social individuals like bands. The reason why public files are such a helpful tool is that the existence of social individuals depends on them. Better to say, it *partially* depends on them: a public file is only a *necessary* condition of the existence of a social individual, not a sufficient one; we need a public file in order to have a band, but, surely, we also need musicians.

However, a public file crucially contributes to the existence of a band by providing it with proper identity conditions. This involves that, in the case of such social individuals, the implicit encyclopedia shared in the relevant community has not only epistemic relevance but also ontological relevance.

Although social constructionism is a problematic view in some respects (for a classic criticism of it, see Hacking 1999), (BV) involves a version of it that is circumscribed to social individuals like bands or teams. (BV) does not claim that *any entity* is the outcome of a social construction. Neither does it claim that *any social entity* is the outcome of a social construction. It just claims that *some social entities* of a distinctive sort, namely social individuals like bands or teams, are socially constructed through the production of public mental files. Indeed, this sort of social constructionism about social individuals involves the refusal of social constructionism about natural individuals. For the latter, the right order of explanation is: a natural individual has an encyclopedia entry because it

exists. For the former, the right order of explanation is the other way round: a social individual exists because it has an encyclopedia entry.<sup>4</sup>

The fact of having a place in the same encyclopedia in which natural individuals have a place provides social individuals with an ontologically respectable existence, so to say. Yet, the existence of social individuals is not of the same sort as that of natural individuals. The latter exist independently of any encyclopedia entry about them, and the encyclopedia only records and describes their existence. By contrast, the implicit encyclopedia does not limit itself to record and describe the existence of social individuals but *contributes* to their existence by providing them with fully-fledged identity conditions.

Certainly, people can meet and play music together regardless of any implicit encyclopedia of the relevant community. Indeed, (BV) does not claim that a group of people cannot play music together if they do not open an entry in the implicit encyclopedia of the community to which they belong. This would be an untenable form of social constructionism. Yet, according to (BV), a group of people playing music together is not a social individual, but only a *candidate* to this condition. A group of people playing music together becomes a fully-fledged social individual only if it enjoys identity conditions that allow us to single it out and keep track of it even when cases like that of the band of Theseus arise. (BV) claims that this group can enjoy these identity conditions, provided that the community opens a public mental file about it.

7. Borrowing Brian Epstein's (2015, 70) terminology, (BV) can be rephrased as claiming that public mental files *are among the metaphysical building blocks of* social individuals like bands, i.e. they *partially ground* them, they contribute to make them what they are.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, when Epstein (2015, 184) tries to figure out the "grounding conditions" of an intramural basketball team, he himself ends up focusing on a *database* populated with the relevant information. Yet, the database as such cannot be a metaphysical building block of the team. Indeed, the database is nothing but a technological means aimed at making the implicit encyclopedia of a certain community explicit. If a database is destroyed by a computer virus, a team that was recorded in that database could keep existing, provided that it remains somehow recorded in the implicit encyclopedia of the community. In contrast, if the whole community is destroyed by a biological virus, then all intramural basketball teams would cease to exist in spite of their being still recorded in the database.

Epstein (2015, 80-82) introduces also a helpful distinction between the *grounds* and the *anchors* of social entities. *Grounds*, as seen above, are what makes social entities what they are,

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<sup>4</sup> I want to thank a reviewer for leading me to clarify better the sort of social constructionism I shall propose.

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, in Epstein's example, the flames ground the fire: "The flames do not cause the fire; in a sense, they *are* the fire" (2015, 69)

namely the metaphysical *building blocks* of social entities, while *anchors* are what *sets up* or *puts in place* social entities. Grounds tell us *what* an entity is, while anchors tell us *by virtue of what* this entity exists. For example, the fact of having been issued by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing *grounds* the existence of a certain banknote, whereas the collective acceptance of the power of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing *anchors* the existence of this banknote (cf. Epstein 2015, 82; see also Guala 2016b, 137). Likewise, I argue, an entry in the implicit encyclopedia *grounds* the existence of a social individual like a band, while collective attitudes and patterns of behaviors that warrant the functioning of the implicit encyclopedia *anchor* the existence of this social individual.

In sum, collective attitudes and patterns of behaviors *anchor* the existence of a certain band by making room for the production of a public file that *grounds* the existence of this band. Just as the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, which is *anchored* in some social agreement, *grounds* the existence of a banknote by issuing it, so the implicit encyclopedia, which is *anchored* in some social agreement, *grounds* the existence of a band by opening an entry about it.

This gives us a way to connect the notion of a public file to the philosophical views according to which social entities are set up by distinctive mental attitudes such as “joint commitment” (Gilbert 1989 and 2014) or “collective intentionality” (Searle 1995 and 2010). I dub such attitudes *cooperative attitudes*, and I argue that they contribute to the *anchoring* of a social individual in at least two distinct ways.

First, cooperative attitudes can allow the formation of groups of people that count as *candidates* to the condition of social individuals. For example, such attitudes can lead to the formation of a group of people playing music together. In this case the relevant attitudes are those of the members of the group itself. Yet, as argued in § 6 above, this group is just a candidate to becoming a fully-fledged social individual provided with identity conditions in the framework of the community. In order to enjoy this ontological upgrade, the candidate social individual should be endowed with a public mental file within the community.

Second, attitudes such as joint commitment and collective intentionality can function as means to the end of managing public files, i.e., of creating, updating or closing an entry in the implicit encyclopedia on which the existence of social individuals like bands depend. In this case, the relevant attitudes are, at least in principle, those of the members of the community as a whole – though, in fact, the community may defer the decisions to experts or representatives so that the implicit encyclopedia can function in spite that surely nobody in the community actually knows its whole content.

Cooperative attitudes such as joint commitment and collective intentionality can be very important tools to the end of managing public files, but they are not the only ones. While cooperative attitudes involve some sort of *active* agreement, also such forms of quite *passive*

agreement as imitation, habit, conformism, enforcement can, too, all play an important role to this end.

In sum, the existence of a social individual like a band depends on a public file about this individual, whatever the means by which this public file has been produced. In Epstein's terms, the social individual *is grounded in* the public file, whatever the way in which this individual *has been anchored* by producing this file.

The point is that the existence of a social individual requires that the relevant community has a way to single this individual out and keep track of it. Even when cooperative attitudes are at play, a public file is necessary for this purpose since cooperative attitudes cannot *directly* provide a social individual with its identity conditions. They must produce a public file in order to do so. Cooperative attitudes are not, as such, vehicles of singular thought, and therefore they need a vehicle of singular thought, namely a mental file, in order to pick out a social individual. More specifically, since cooperative attitudes are *collective* attitudes, they need a *shared* mental file, namely a public file. Ultimately, cooperative attitudes can create a social individual only *indirectly*, through the production of a public file about it.

One of the main goals of this paper – arguably its main goal – precisely consists in highlighting this often unnoticed link, namely the public file, that allows cooperative attitudes to bring and keep a social individual into existence. In a seminal paper on the existence and persistence of social individuals (which he calls “social forms”), George Simmel points out that such entities can preserve their existence by “embodying themselves in impersonal objects” (1986-1897, 81, my translation from French), as for example a real estate. My aim, here, consists in highlighting a very special “impersonal object”, namely the public file, which plays a key role in the existence and persistence of social individuals like bands.<sup>6</sup>

Even if a public file can derive from joint commitment or collective intentionality, it is not, as such, a commitment or an intention. A public file basically is a *shared memory* about a certain individual, i.e., a *repository of information* that *the community* takes to be about this individual. In this sense, (BV) exhibits an analogy and a difference with respect to the account of personal identity proposed by Locke (1690, chap. 27). The analogy is that in both cases identity rests upon memory. The difference is that Locke considers the identity of a person and takes her own experiential memories as the relevant ones whereas (BV) considers the identity of a social individual and takes the community's shared memories about this individual as the relevant ones.

As a shared memory, a public file usually depends on personal memories of the members of a community but it can also depend on externalized memories such as documents or databases. Furthermore, a public file has a normative role, since it establishes what a member of the

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<sup>6</sup> I want to thank a reviewer for drawing my attention to Simmel's paper.

community *ought to know* in order to behave as a well-informed agent. Ultimately, a public file is a shared memory endowed with a special sort of normativity, which I call *epistemic normativity* since it concerns what one *ought to know*.

To sum up, joint commitment and collective intentionality, just as conformism and enforcement, can contribute to create a shared memory and to endow it with epistemic normativity. In Epstein's terms, they can contribute to *anchoring* the existence of social individuals. Yet what *grounds* the existence of a social individual like a band is a shared memory endowed with epistemic normativity, namely a public file.

8. I have chosen a rock band as a case study, and I have suggested that my account can be extended to other social individuals as for example basketball teams. Still, one might wonder what the scope of this account is. For instance, might it be applied to social collectives such as religious sects, unions, political parties, and even nations?

First, it is worth noting that a mental file is a vehicle of *singular* thought, and therefore the account can be applied only to social entities that we normally treat as individual entities, namely, social individuals. Thus, public files cannot be used to build a theory of social kinds such as 'money' or 'universities'. At most, an approach based on public files can provide us with an account of single currencies (e.g. the US Dollar, the Euro) or of single universities (e.g. Stanford University, Heidelberg University).

Furthermore, public files, as such, cannot explain why some social entities are provided with deontic features, i.e., those bundles of rights and duties that Searle (1995) calls *status functions* (for instance, a union has the right to bargain with management and the duty to protect workers). As said, a public file only involves *epistemic normativity*, which establishes what a member of the community *ought to know* in order to count as a well-informed agent. A public file, as such, cannot confer rights and duties, and therefore status functions, to individuals. Nevertheless, a public file that grounds a certain social individual can contain *deontic information*, i.e. information that specifies the rights and duties associated with that social individual.

In the case of rock bands, the deontic dimension seems to be less relevant, and therefore the role of the public file as a ground of the social individual is easier to be highlighted. When the deontic dimension becomes more relevant, as for example in the case of a union or a university, one might be tempted to say that, in such cases, it is the bundle of rights and duties that brings and keeps the social individual into existence. This would entail that the public file is just a way of gathering information about this individual, which nevertheless exists independently of the corresponding public file.

Still, I contend, we should resist this temptation. Consider a social individual like an individual

union or an individual party. This social individual is such that its rights and duties are conferred to *something* having an individual identity, viz. something that we can single out and trace through time and change. Rights and duties are not sufficient for this purpose. A social individual can exist as a bundle of rights and duties only if there is *something* that allows us to *tie* such rights and duties together. That is to say that rights and duties must be attached to a *bearer*, i.e. a social individual that we can identify and reidentify independently of the (possibly changing) right and duties conferred to it. As argued in §§ 3—7 above, a public file provides a social individual with identity conditions that warrant our capacity to single it out and keep track of it through time and changes, even when Theseus-like cases arise. That is why, I contend, we need a public file also for a social individual having a prominently deontic dimension.

In fact, even extremely complex social individuals such as nations may face problems like that of the band of Theseus. Just as, at a certain moment, there can be two (or even more) candidates to the condition of the proper rock band, much the same way, there can be two (or even more) candidates to the condition of the proper nation during a civil war. The control over the territory surely can play a key role in the latter case (the territory, here, plays the role of the Simmelian “impersonal object”, see § 7 above). Yet, this is not the whole story.

Consider the case of a nation *N* in which, during a civil war, the contender *A* controls a part of *N*’s territory and the contender *B* controls another part of this territory. I argue that, from an external perspective, whether *A* or *B* counts as the proper *N* depends on the way in which the international community updates its public file concerning *N*. Even in the limit case in which *B* controls *all* *N*’s territories, the international community can still designate *A* in the public file concerning *N*. In this limit case, *A* keeps existing as the *nation N* in spite of lacking the possession of a territory that would make it also a *state*. Conversely, *B* does not count as the nation *N*, in spite of its possession of the relevant territory, since the international community’s public file concerning *N* does not designate *B*.

In such cases, an important alternative may consist in closing the public file about a former nation *N* and open two new files about two new nations, namely *A* and *B*. This corresponds to the operation on mental files that Jeshion calls “separation” (2010, 131). As a historical example, consider the (fortunately pacific) separation of Czechoslovakia in Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

Furthermore, an account of nations in terms of public files may help us to explain historical cases like that of Poland, which has kept existing as *the same nation* in spite of relevant changes in its territory during the centuries, and even periods without a territory. On the one hand, the persistence of Poland in spite of the changes in its territory (or even the lack of a territory) requires a certain *agreement* within both the Polish people and the international community. In Epstein’s

terms, the persistence of Poland is *anchored* by such an agreement. On the other hand, as I pointed out in § 7, such an agreement involves the sharing of a *public file*, which, in the case under examination, *grounds* the persistence of Poland in spite of the changes in its territory (or even the lack of a territory). In sum, the *agreement* of the relevant subjects has preserved the existence of Poland through time and changes by keeping the corresponding *public file* open.<sup>7</sup>

9. A mental-file-based account of social individuals may be extended far beyond paradigmatic cases such as bands, but should remain an account of social *individuals*, since mental files essentially are vehicles of singular thought. Still, social individuals, as noted above, usually are instances of social *kinds*. So, what is the place of social kinds in this account?

Social kinds are universals and, according to classical metaphysics, we can understand a universal in three different ways: (i) *ante rem*, (ii) *in re*, or (iii) *post rem*. Let us consider the case of bands, assuming that bands such as the Rolling Stones, The Who, Teenage Fanclub are particulars that instantiate the BAND social kind (henceforth I will use capital letters to designate kinds).

i) BAND, as a universal, exists *in re* inasmuch as there are some particular bands that instantiate it. Thus, the existence of a kind as an *in re* universal depends on the existence of its instances, which in turn – according to (BV) – depends on public mental files. Therefore, the existence of the BAND kind as an *in re* universal depends on public mental files.

ii) BAND, as a universal, exists *post rem* inasmuch as it is used as a principle of collection of similar particular social individuals such as the Rolling Stones, The Who, etc. As suggested by Thorben Petersen (2015), all bands share some basic features: they have more than one member and all such members are musicians who jointly act in order to produce musical sounds. BAND, as a *post rem* universal, can be seen as a cluster of such features. This allows us to predict and control behavior, and in this sense social kinds play a basic epistemic role (cf. Guala 2016a, 133; and Guala 2016b, 145). For example, if one is going to attend the exhibition of a band, one can predict that there will be some musicians playing together. Still, also in this case, the social kind as a principle of collection of similar instances depends on the instances it should collect, and therefore – according to (BV) – on the public files that ground them.

iii) BAND, as a universal, exists *ante rem* inasmuch as it preexists its instances and functions as a principle of construction of them. Ontological parsimony (i.e. Occam's razor) is normally a good reason to avoid postulating an *ante rem* universal unless there are reasons that are more

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<sup>7</sup> I want to thank a reviewer for leading me to apply my account of social individuals to historical cases like that of Poland. An interesting attempt to treat the history of Poland as a case study for social ontology can be found in Ferraris (2013, 242). He argues that what warrants the persistence of Poland in spite of the changes in its territory is a bunch of documents. My point, here, is slightly different: what grounds the persistence of Poland is a public file, which is anchored in some sort of agreement and can be supported by a bunch of documents.



cogent. In the case of bands, one may find it hard to see such reasons. Yet, if one moves from bands to other kinds of social groups as for example basketball teams, one can easily find some reasons in favor of social kinds as *ante rem* universals. Indeed, the existence of a basketball team rests upon the existence of a game, namely basketball, and one can state that the BASKETBALL TEAM universal exists *ante rem* within the *institution* of basketball. I conceive of an institution, here, as a bundle of rules that governs behavior in various related strategic interactions (cf. North 1990, 3-4; and Guala 2016a, 3-19). An institution, so understood, can involve social kinds as *ante rem* universals, i.e., as principles of construction of similar instances that are established by the rules that constitute the institution itself. From this perspective, even individual bands can be treated as instances of an *ante rem* kind BAND inasmuch as they are constituted within a formal legal framework involving written rules, contracts, royalties etc., which prescribes how an instance of this kind should be constructed. One might call this framework ‘the institution of pop music’.

Still, even if we acknowledge such social kinds as *ante rem* universals, it remains to be explained how individuals belonging to these kinds are brought and kept into existence. Social kinds provide us with principles of construction of like instances, but the instances remain to be constructed. We need something that allows us to move from the social kind as an *ante rem* universal to the *res* itself. The public mental file fulfills this need since it supplies identity conditions, which warrant the unique individuality of a particular instance of a social kind allowing us to single this instance out, keep track of it, and distinguish it from all other instances of that kind.

Although a social kind can involve a formal procedure for the construction of a social individual, this procedure still requires the mediation of a public file that allows us to pick out the social individual we are going to construct. At most, a social kind, as an *ante rem* universal, can provide us with formal procedures that establish how to produce and manage the public files about the instances of that kind (for example, by interacting with a certain database, as in Epstein’s case study of an intramural basketball team, discussed above in § 6). Yet, also in this case, the mediation of a public file is required in order to bring and keep a social individual into existence.

In fact, within the scope of a community, the formal procedures fixed by social kinds can be overridden by social practices. For example, a community may treat a certain group of musicians as a band in spite of the fact that this group does not comply with the formal procedure for the construction of a band within that community. My account can effectively explain this case by arguing that, here, the community produces the public file about the band by exploiting implicitly shared understandings instead of by following an explicit formal procedure.<sup>8</sup>

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8 From this perspective, an interesting case is that of the Italian soccer team Fiorentina Viola (founded in August 2002), which in practice is treated as identical with the soccer team Fiorentina (gone bankrupt in July 2002) though, from a legal point of view, they are distinct entities (cf. Ferraris 2013, 244-245). My explanation is that they are treated as the same team

While natural kinds such as CAT or OAK directly provide their instances with proper identity conditions (cf. Lowe 1996, chap. 8; and Wiggins 2001, chap. 2), social kinds such as BAND or TEAM require the mediation of public files in order to do so. In fact, social kinds, unlike natural kinds (cf. Wiggins 2001, chap. 7, § 17), can involve cases like the Band of Theseus, which, as argued in §§ 3—7 above, require a public file in order to provide social individuals with proper identity conditions.<sup>9</sup>

10. One last point I shall clarify concerns the notion of community. I conceive of a public mental file as a repository of information that *the relevant community* takes to be about a singular individual. But what is this relevant community? Is it a social individual in turn? Does it itself rest upon a public mental file? Here, one might raise a worry of circularity: the notion of public mental file rests upon the notion of relevant community, but this notion in turn rests upon the notion of mental file.

This worry can be addressed by considering the notion of a self file. Recanati (2012, 68) defines it as the mental file in which a subject stores information about herself. By underlying *the subject*, the self file is more fundamental than all other mental files, which *the subject herself* deploys in order to store information about the various individuals she encounters.

I argue that something similar happens in the case of a community. The creation and the use of various public files about social individuals within a community rest upon a public file through which the community stores information about itself. I call this ‘the ourselves file’. This is the only public file that cannot be defined by making reference to the shared understandings of *a community* since it is this very file that underlies the existence of *the community itself*. The ourselves file, as a public file, is produced and shared by the members of a community. Yet, in this basic case, the production and sharing of the file is *not* to be understood as a process that occurs within an already established community. From whatever obscure level the ourselves file and the community emerge, they emerge together.

Given that the community rests on an *ourselves file*, and given that all other public files need a community in order to be produced, one can conclude that the creation of social individuals like bands is possible only within the scope established by the ourselves file. There are no bands as

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because the public file remains the same.

9 I want to thank a reviewer for leading me to consider that artifactual kinds such as ships are an interesting intermediate category in this respect. Unlike natural kinds, they face Theseus-like cases and yet, unlike social kinds, their instances seem to be provided with proper identity conditions regardless of the existence of the corresponding public files, at least if one endorses Wiggins’s (2001, chap. 3, §§ 3—4) account of artifactual kinds. However, I guess, public files can still play a crucial role at least for what concerns the identity conditions of some peculiar artifactual individuals, for example works of art. But this shall be the topic of another paper.

such, but only bands within the scope of a community identified by an ourselves file.

The minimal relevant community of which one can conceive is that consisting of the members of the band itself. Let us call this ‘the micro-community’. In this case, the public file concerning the band coincides with the ourselves file of the micro-community: we just have a micro-community whose members play music together.<sup>10</sup>

From the point of view of the wider cultural community to which these people playing music together belong, the ontological issue becomes more complex. Insofar as there is no public file about those people at this level, we do not still have a band, understood as a fully-fledged social individual, but only a *candidate* to this condition (see § 6 above). A group of people playing music together becomes a fully-fledged social individual when the community produces a public file about this band that is distinct from the ourselves file of the micro-community constituted by the members of the band. For example, a group of people playing music together becomes a band when a public file about them is produced within a community of music appreciators. After all, bands exist to be listened to by audiences.

In conclusion, social individuals like bands exist in a prominent sense when the community that has public files about them exhibits a complexity and a history such that we can call it a *culture*. Nowadays, an interesting ontological consequence of the socio-historical phenomenon called ‘globalization’ is that one can quite easily make reference to the maximal community that one might call ‘the human culture’. According to the framework proposed in this paper, having an entry in the implicit encyclopedia of the human culture is the preeminent way in which a social individual like a band can exist.

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<sup>10</sup> However, given (BV), this allows us to warrant that there is a basic sense in which this band exists: it exists inasmuch as there is a public file about it, albeit circumscribed to a micro-community.

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