

# Idealism and the Harmony of Thought and Reality

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## **Abstract**

Although idealism was widely defended in the history of philosophy, it is nowadays almost universally considered a non-starter. This holds in particular for a strong form of idealism, which asserts that not just minds or the mental in general, but our human minds in particular are metaphysically central to reality. Such a view seems to be excessively anthropocentric and contrary to what we by now know about our place in the universe. Nonetheless, there is reason to think that such a strong form of idealism is indeed correct. In this paper I will present an argument for idealism of this kind via considerations about a harmony between our thought and reality. The central argument in favor of idealism will come from a possibly unexpected source. We can see that a strong form of idealism is true simply from considerations about our own language alone. I'll argue that thinking about how we represent reality allows us to conclude that idealism is true and thus that reality must be a certain way. But no argument of this kind seems to be able to allow for a metaphysical conclusion like idealism, since considerations about our own language alone only show how we represent reality, not how reality is. And thus idealism can't possibly follow, since it concerns how reality is, not just how we represent it to be. A good part in the second half of the paper is devoted to showing how such an argument is possible after all, and that it really does establish idealism.

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# 1 Idealism and our place in the world

What is the place and significance of human beings in the world as whole? Are we central in it, or just an afterthought? When the overall story of reality is written, do we play a central part, or are we merely mentioned in a footnote? Although these are natural and pressing questions to ask, they are also not very clear questions as stated, and it isn't obvious how to state them better. For example, we might well be special in many ways. We might be the best at music in all of reality, and that would indeed make us special. But by itself this does not make us special in the right way, nor any more special than, say, the largest volcano. The largest volcano would also be special in a sense, it is the largest one after all. But reality as a whole might not care about volcanos, and it similarly might not care about music. The real question is not about being best or worst in some way, but about something different. It is about being central to the world considered as a whole, central for its large-scale and most general features. Or to put it differently: it is about being metaphysically central to reality. Although this still isn't very precise, it is at least better. And we can do even better by approaching the question via its two most prominent answers, which would seem to answer the question as it is intended, and which thereby also illuminate the question itself. On one of these answers we are not special, and on the other one we are.

The first is the standard naturalistic answer. It holds that we are not central to the world. We are merely complex arrangements of the same matter that also exists everywhere else. This arrangement of matter didn't have to occur, and that it did was a fortunate accident. It is a bonus to reality, but it isn't a central part to it. That matter ever arranged itself in this special and complex way in one small part of the world doesn't affect most of the rest of it, and is merely a local abnormality. When the overall story of what reality in general is like is told, matter will likely be mentioned a lot, time will likely come up, but that matter formed volcanos or humans will at best be in a footnote. And so we are not central to the world.

The second answer says that we are special and central. It is a theistic answer, which holds that our central place in reality is secured by our relationship to a divine being. We are central, since we are in part the reason why there is a material world in the first place. God created the material world in part with us in mind. The material world was created for us, with us human beings being crucial for its purpose and existence. And so the overall story of the world as a whole will have to mention us or leave something important out.

Both of these answers are well-known and widely defended. But there is also a third answer to the question about our place in the world. This answer is not widely known nor widely defended, at least these

days. It is an idealist answer, which holds that we are metaphysically central to reality, since there is a close connection between reality itself and our minds. Our minds are centrally involved in what reality is, and because of this close connection we are special in the world as a whole. Such an idealist position was not unheard of during some parts of the history of philosophy, but it does seem more than dated now and excessively anthropocentric. Why would it be that our human minds are metaphysically central to all of reality? Who would think that we are so special that reality itself is tied to us? And there is no denying that this is the *prima facie* right reaction to have towards such a form of idealism. But still, I hope to argue in this paper that there is good reason to think that idealism so understood is true after all. I will try to make precise in what sense we are metaphysically central to reality, and present an argument for our being central in just this way. The argument would show that we are metaphysically central to reality as a whole, not via our connection to a divine being, but more directly. And the way we are central is properly a form of idealism, although not one of the more well-known versions of idealism.

## 2 Idealism via harmony

Idealism is, first and foremost, a certain grand metaphysical vision of the place of minds or the mental in reality. Broadly understood, idealism is the view that minds are metaphysically central in reality. Somehow minds are central to the world, in a way that matters for the large-scale overall story of what the world is like. This characterization is rather vague and rather broad, but that can be a good thing, since idealism itself is a rather vague term. Many philosophers associate idealism first and foremost with the mind body problem. So understood, idealism is a third answer to the question how minds and matter relate to each other. On the classic materialist view, minds somehow arise out of matter. On the classic dualist view, matter alone isn't sufficient to give rise to minds, but a further distinctly mental ingredient is needed as well. On the classic idealist view, matter arises somehow from minds. This classic idealist position is truly idealism, but it is only one of many ways idealism could be true. Idealism does not have to be understood as being primarily concerned with the relationship between minds and matter. It should instead be seen more broadly, as being concerned with the place of minds in reality. And characterizing idealism broadly allows for minds to be central not just because reality is mental — be it because it is constructed from something mental or otherwise — but in many other ways as well.<sup>1</sup> But this is maybe also

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<sup>1</sup>Other characterizations of idealism often incorporate a particular metaphysical picture about how minds are central in reality or a particular picture of metaphysics. For

too broad, in that it encompasses many theistic views, which might or might not fit the spirit of idealism. For example, it seems to include the view that a divine mind is metaphysically central to the world, since it created the material world. I won't try to settle these matters of terminology, since we won't simply discuss idealism in the broad sense here and what place a divine mind has in the world. Our focus will not be on whether minds in general are metaphysically central to reality, but whether our human minds in particular are metaphysically central. Let us call *broad idealism* the view that minds, or the mental in general, are metaphysically central to reality, and *strong idealism* the view that our human minds are metaphysically central to reality.<sup>2</sup>

Only strong idealism would give us a third answer to the big question about our place in the world. And it is this idealist view in particular that must seem absurd and an expression of anthropocentric hubris of an extreme kind. Why would we human beings be metaphysically central to the world? To be sure, there are a number of options on the table, but little reason to think that those options obtain. Maybe we are the only creatures who think about reality and who understand parts of it. And maybe the purpose of reality is self-understanding, and we are the agents of that understanding. That would make us central, but we have little reason to think that reality has any such purpose, not to speak of that we are the only ones who understand parts of it. Or maybe reality is constructed from some mental phenomena, and it is so constructed by us. But besides the question why one should think so, this gives rise to the question how this is compatible with many facts we have found out about the world: that there were rocks long before there were humans, that some parts of the world are too far away for us to see, and so on. Maybe such a version of idealism can be defended somehow, but it should be clear that this will be a real challenge, and not one we have good reason to think that it can be

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example, Guyer and Horstmann take idealism, on its metaphysical understanding, to involve the view that “something mental [...] is the ultimate foundation of all reality” [Guyer and Horstmann, 2015]. But to rely on a distinction between the ultimate foundation of reality and what is derivative on it is to rely on a substantial metaphysical picture, one that is not itself part of idealism. A broader and vaguer characterization is at first preferable, which can then be filled in many different ways.

<sup>2</sup>Broad and strong idealism are not opposites, but focus on two separate dimensions of idealism. Broad idealism concerns the centrality of minds in reality in general, not something more narrow like the relationship between minds and matter, or the grounding of non-mental facts in mental facts. These would be two of many possible ways in which idealism could be understood more narrowly. Strong idealism focuses on our minds, not something weaker like minds or the mental in general. A more narrow version of idealism could also be strong. For example, it might hold that our minds in particular give rise to matter. In this paper I will understand idealism in general broadly, and then investigate whether a strong form of idealism so understood is true.

met.<sup>3</sup> However one might want to do this, one will have to meet some constraints: one has to explicitly formulate the idealist position one hopes to defend, one has to make clear that this position is compatible with what we otherwise know to be the case, and one has to give an argument that idealism so formulated is indeed correct. And given these constraints it is hard to see how one could defend a form of strong idealism.

But despite these concerns, there are a number of options that one has for being an idealist, even given these constraints.<sup>4</sup> Some of the options can be made vivid by thinking about each of the three parts in our characterization of idealism: [minds]<sub>1</sub> being [metaphysically central]<sub>2</sub> to [reality]<sub>3</sub>. We can first wonder which parts of our minds might be central: perception, consciousness, conceptual thought, emotion, etc.. We can wonder in what sense our minds might be central. And we can finally wonder what reality is supposed to be. I would like to jump straight to the last one now, since a crucial distinction about reality strikes me as a key to progress.

Reality famously can be thought of in two ways: as the totality of things or as the totality of facts. Reality can be understood either as all there is, or as all that is the case. Some philosophers think that only one of them is properly called ‘reality’, while the other is to be called something else.<sup>5</sup> But this should best be seen as introducing unambiguous terminology to make an ordinary underspecified notion of reality precise. The concept of reality is naturally clarified by distinguishing two different things one might mean by it: what is the case or what is. And consequently we can distinguish two versions of idealism. First, *ontological idealism*, which holds that minds are central for reality understood as the totality of things, and second, *alethic idealism*, which holds that minds are central for reality understood as the totality of facts. Since we will only focus on strong idealism here — the version of idealism that claims that our human minds are central

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<sup>3</sup>Some philosophers have recently defended such broadly phenomenalist versions of idealism, for example [Foster, 2008] and [Pelczar, 2015]. For a sympathetic discussion, but not a full endorsement, of phenomenism, see [Yetter-Chapell, 2018]. I argue against phenomenism in chapter 2 of [Hofweber, 201X].

<sup>4</sup>For a critical survey of several of them, see [Hofweber, 201X]. They include a number of views debated in the more recent metaphysics literature, for example, conventionalism about compositions, see [Einheuser, 2006], fragmentalism tied to subjects, see [Fine, 2005], the subjectivity thesis, see [Koch, 2006b] and [Koch, 2006a] for a defense and [Hofweber, 2015] for a critical discussion, as well as others.

<sup>5</sup>For example, reality as the totality of things might better be called ‘what is real’, while only the totality of facts is properly called ‘reality’. In that spirit, see, for example, [Fine, 2009]. I am skipping some complexities in Fine’s view here, which are not really central for our main discussion, in particular his view that not all things have to be real.

— we will take both versions of idealism as versions of strong idealism, and thus versions that hold that our human minds are central for reality understood in one way or the other. At first this distinction might seem legitimate, but not helpful. All the *prima facie* problems one might have with strong idealism seem to apply to either one of these two forms. Not only did things exist long before there were humans, some facts obtained long before there were humans. In addition, there is a close relationship between what there is and what is the case. For any thing that exists there is a fact that this thing exists. And also the other way round: for any fact that some thing exists there has to exist that thing for the fact to obtain. Ontological and alethic idealism seem to be equally problematic.

However, there is a way of motivating idealism which is tied to this distinction between thinking of reality as either the totality of facts or the totality of things. Focusing on reality as the totality of facts in particular we can note that facts are often similar to each other in particular ways. For example, the fact that Sue is tall is similar in one way to the fact that Joe is hungry. Both facts are facts of an object having a property. We can say that these facts share a structure: they have an object-property structure. Talk of structure is supposed to be taken in an innocent sense here, if at all possible. That these facts have an object-property structure is, in the relevant sense of the phrase, a consequence of their being facts of an object having a property. To say that facts have a structure in our sense does not endorse a particular metaphysics of facts, nor does it use a substantial metaphysical notion of structure.<sup>6</sup> It only puts a label on the obvious: some facts are facts of objects having properties, other facts are different kinds of facts.<sup>7</sup> The structure of facts seems to have a connection to our thoughts. We represent facts in conceptual thought, as well as in language, in the obvious way that the fact that Sue is tall is represented by my thought that Sue is tall and by the sentence ‘Sue is tall’. This thought, or sentence, in turn has a particular form: it is a thought, or sentence, of a subject being attributed a predicate. Such thoughts and sentences we can thus say have a subject-predicate form. Naturally, there is a connection between the thought and the fact it is about. The form of the thought seems to match up perfectly with the structure of the fact. A subject-predicate thought represents a fact with an object-property structure. In this simple case there seems to

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<sup>6</sup>See [Sider, 2011] for the latter.

<sup>7</sup>Whether each fact has a unique structure is controversial, with Frege being a likely exception to the more standard view that they do have a unique structure. Frege famously held that contents can be carved up in different ways, and this naturally can be understood as being associated with the view that facts can have more than one structure. See [Frege, 1884]. I hope to make clear below that this issue is largely irrelevant for us here.

be a perfect match between the form of our thought and the structure of the fact that is represented with it. But why is there this match? Does this correspondence of form and structure need, and allow for, an explanation?

There are two straightforward ways in which this correspondence could be explained, which are based on two different directions of what is explanatorily more basic: the form of our thoughts or the structure of the facts. The realist<sup>8</sup> will hold that our thoughts have their form because the facts have the corresponding structure. And an idealist can see it the other way round: the facts have the structure because our thoughts have the form. And at first it must seem that the realist got it right. The realist has a perfectly good explanation of why some of our thoughts have a subject-predicate form, which in outline goes as follows: Our minds developed in a world full of facts that have an object-property structure, i.e. of objects having properties. It would be quite inefficient for our minds to have a separate representation for each fact, in particular since the same object often has many properties, and the same property is often had by many objects. Thus our representations developed to exploit the structure of the facts and their components. Therefore we ended up with separate representations for the object and the property: a subject and a predicate, which get combined somehow to represent the whole fact. And thus our minds have representations that have a subject-predicate form, which exactly corresponds to the object-property structure of the facts.

The realist thus has a perfectly good explanation of why some of our forms of thought correspond to the structure of some of the facts. And the realist can employ the same strategy for any other form of our thoughts that we might find. In other words, the realist can explain why our forms are correct: the forms we have correctly correspond to the structure of the relevant facts. But the question remains whether our forms are complete: whether for every structure that occurs in some of the facts there is a form of some of our thoughts that corresponds to it. The realist might naturally be inclined to accept at least the possibility of structures among the facts that go beyond the forms of our thoughts. Our forms are correct, but maybe not complete, or so it is natural for the realist to hold. However, here the idealist will see things differently. If the facts have the structures they have because of the forms of our thoughts then it is natural to hold that all the structure there is to be found in the facts corresponds to the forms of our thoughts. An idealist would thus naturally hold that our forms are,

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<sup>8</sup>A realist here is just an anti-idealist. On other uses of 'realist' an idealist can, of course, be a realist as well. For example, the version of idealism defended below is fully realist in other senses of the word.



and have to be, complete when it comes to capturing the structures of the facts. To the contrary, a realist would naturally accept at least the possibility that some structures among the facts go beyond the forms of our thoughts.

This difference between realism and idealism leads to a possibility of formulating and defending a version of idealism. If we had reason to think that the structure of the facts does not, and cannot, go beyond the forms of our thoughts then this might support idealism. There might be an explanation why our forms of thought are complete when it comes to capturing the structure of the facts, and this explanation might be an idealist one. This is the strategy for formulating and defending a version of idealism that I hope to pursue in this paper.

To bring in some terminology, let us call a fact which we human beings cannot represent in thought or language an *ineffable fact*. This notion is unclear, since it is unclear what ‘cannot’ in its definition means. I have tried to spell out the notion of an ineffable fact in more detail and more precisely in [Hofweber, 2016a], but since we will be focusing on a particular kind of ineffability momentarily we will be able to largely sidestep this issue, as I hope will be clear soon. In any case, the intended sense of ‘cannot’ is one in principle, not just in fact. No one can represent the fact what everyone’s phone number is, since it is simply too complicated a fact to fit into one mind or one speaker’s lifetime. But there is no mismatch between our minds and reality in this case, the fact is simply a complex conjunction of facts we can easily represent. The more interesting notion of the ineffable is one that does not just rely on our limited lifetime, but on a different, more serious mismatch between our minds and the facts.

There could in essence be two main reasons why a fact is ineffable in principle, which are related to why the paradigmatic way in which we represent facts, namely with a subject predicate representation, might not be good enough to represent a particular fact. First it could be that the fact is one of an object having a property, but we are unable somehow to either represent the object or else represent the property. Second it could be that in order to represent the fact we need a completely different kind of representation, one with a different form than a subject-predicate representation. The fact then is not one of an object having a property, but a completely different kind of fact. We can consequently distinguish two kinds of ineffable facts. First it could be that in order for us to be able to represent a particular fact we need to have available a representation with a certain form, but we do not and cannot have any representations with that form. The structure of this fact requires a form of representation that is not available to a mind like ours. We can call a fact *structurally ineffable* if the source of the ineffability of the fact is its structure. It is ineffable,

since its structure goes beyond the forms we have available.<sup>9</sup> Second, the source of ineffability might not be structure, but content. Although we might be able to represent facts with the relevant structure, since we have thoughts of the required form, we are nonetheless unable to fill in the form with the appropriate content. This would be the case when an object has a particular property, but we are unable to represent either the object or the property. We can call a fact that is ineffable even though we have the form to match its structure *content ineffable*. Structurally ineffable facts are truly alien to us, while content ineffable facts are not all that alien, since they are at least facts of the same general kind as facts we can represent.

We can now say that our minds and reality are in *structural harmony* just in case there are no structurally ineffable facts. Our minds and reality are in *complete harmony* just in case there are no ineffable facts at all. If harmony, be it structural or complete, obtains then this could be by accident, or for a reason. It could be, for example, that all facts are just facts of objects having properties. Maybe the world is simple in this way, and then our minds would be good enough to represent all the facts at least in their structural aspects, and maybe even completely. There would then be no structurally ineffable facts, not because of an intimate connection between our minds and reality, but because we got lucky in that reality is simple and uniform enough so that the forms of our thoughts are good enough to match the structure of all the facts. But we would be lucky if that were the case, and we should thus not expect it. We know that not all the facts are this simple, since many facts we can represent don't have simply the structure of an object having a property. We have more forms of thought than simply subject-predicate representations, and since we have good reason to think that some of those representations represent accurately, we have reason to think that the facts that obtain don't all have the structure of an object having a property. But if other structures are possible, why should we think that all the structure that might be realized in facts is structure corresponding to one of our forms of thought? The realist should expect that structurally ineffable facts are at least possible and not ruled out in principle. If there aren't any then we got lucky, but there is no guarantee that we should get lucky. The idealist, on the other hand, could turn this around and aim to support idealism via an argument that structural ineffability is ruled out in principle. The reason why there aren't, and can't be, any structurally ineffable facts might support idealism, since it might make clear that there is an

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<sup>9</sup>If facts can have more than one structure then we take structural ineffability in the strongest sense: for none of its structures do we have a matching form. In light of this it should become clear later that it won't really matter whether facts have a unique structure.

intimate connection between the form of our thoughts and the structure of the facts that they represent. It might be that our minds limit the range of facts that could in principle obtain in that any fact that might obtain is required to have a structure corresponding to a form of our thought. And if so then we might be central in reality after all, since we play a central role in reality understood as the totality of facts. The facts might have to conform to our form of thought, not by accident but for a reason that makes clear that our minds are central in reality.<sup>10</sup>

To try to motivate idealism via considerations of the harmony of thought and reality is so far only a strategy for a defense. If it were successful it might well support a rather different version of idealism than versions where the material world is somehow constructed from phenomena or otherwise tied to our perceptual experience. Whether this strategy is at all fruitful will depend on two things. First, whether there is a good argument that harmony has to obtain in the first place. Second, whether this argument can be seen as providing the right kind of reason for why harmony obtains, namely the kind of reason that would support idealism. In the following I would like to argue that this strategy is indeed successful. Harmony must obtain, and the reason why it must obtain supports idealism. We will now look at these two points in order: first why harmony must obtain, and second why the reason for its obtaining supports idealism.<sup>11</sup>

### 3 Harmony via internalism

In this section I will present the argument that structural harmony must obtain. The argument will be slightly unusual for its desired conclusion in that it comes from considerations in the philosophy of language, in particular about our own language, and what we do when we talk about facts or propositions. Obviously, facts about our own language are controversial and non-trivial, and I won't be able to argue

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<sup>10</sup>Thomas Nagel is slightly unusual, but I believe correct, when he in [Nagel, 1986] takes the real issue about idealism and realism to be whether the world might outrun our representational capacities. Nagel, of course, rejects idealism so understood.

<sup>11</sup>In this paper I will focus on the connection between idealism and structural harmony. A similar issue arises by considering complete harmony, and the possibility of ineffable facts in general. This latter question leads to a number of complications that require more detailed discussion of various notions and theses that can be glossed over when focusing on structural harmony instead. I defend the stronger idealist claim tied to complete harmony in other work, in particular chapters 11 and 12 of [Hofweber, 201X], as well as in [Hofweber, 2016a]. But I will leave this more advanced topic largely aside in this paper, since the main idea of a motivation of idealism via considerations of harmony can work with either kind of harmony.

for these largely empirical claims in details here. I will instead present two sides of an ongoing debate, and argue that harmony follows if we take one of those sides. This side should seem like a reasonable option, and is in fact the side I take to be correct, and have argued is correct in more detail elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> After presenting the argument I will discuss in some detail how an argument like this could possibly establish a metaphysical conclusion like idealism.

### 3.1 Talk about facts and propositions

When we talk about facts in English we generally do so most directly with a *that*-clause or an phrase like ‘the fact that p’. I will call instances of both *fact terms*. They occur in examples like

- (1) That p is surprising.
- (2) The fact that p is surprising.

*That*-clauses do not always stand for facts. Sometimes they stand for propositions, as when someone believes that p, but it is not the case that p, and thus not a fact that p. But for any true *that*-clause there will be a corresponding fact that p. Whether facts just are true propositions, or whether they merely correspond to true propositions, won’t matter for us here. What matters instead is this question: when we use a *that*-clause or fact term, are we thereby referring to some thing or entity? Are fact terms like names for facts, or are they non-referential expressions? When I utter (1), am I referring to some thing and say of it that it is surprising? Or am I doing something else with the *that*-clause, something other than referring? Am I specifying or stating what is surprising, without referring to it? That distinction might not be fully precise, but hopefully intuitive enough to consider some reasons for one answer or the other.

Prima facie one might think that *that*-clauses are not referential. *That*-clauses are clauses, and clauses in general seem to be rather different from names, the paradigmatic category of referring expressions. When I say “What he did / whatever she said / where I live / etc. is surprising” it seems implausible at first to think that the relevant clauses refer to some thing.

Despite this, there is good reason to think that they do refer after all. In particular, there are valid quantifier inferences which seem to settle the question whether these clauses are referential. From (1) as well as (2) it follows that

- (3) Something is surprising.

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<sup>12</sup>See, in particular, chapters 3, 8, and 9 of [Hofweber, 2016b].

And for (3) to be true it must be the case that there is some thing or entity which is surprising. And that thing or entity is just what the that-clause of fact-term is referring to. So, that-clauses refer to facts or propositions, or so the argument from quantifier inferences.

But there are also good reasons to think that that-clauses do not refer. If they refer then they should have a feature shared with paradigmatic referential expressions: substitutability. If a term refers then it should matter only for the truth conditions of the sentence in which it occurs what object is referred to, not how it is referred to. Thus one referential term should be substitutable for another one as long as they refer to the same things. But as is well known and widely debated in the literature on this question,<sup>13</sup> that-clauses and fact or proposition terms seem not always to be substitutable for each other. There seems to be a difference in truth conditions between the pair:

- (4) John fears that his mother will find out.
- (5) John fears the proposition / the fact that his mother will find out.

The former is fear concerning John's mother, the latter is proposition phobia, fear of propositions itself. And those are different things. So, substitution speaks *prima facie* against fact terms being referential, quantification *prima facie* for their being referential. Reasonable people can and do disagree on what we should say about this question, which is a question largely in the philosophy of language. For all we know, it might turn out one way or the other. If they are referential then something needs to be said about the substitution arguments. If they are non-referential then something needs to be said about quantification. Let's think a bit more about the second one: what is going on in the quantifier inferences, in particular if that-clauses are not referential.

### 3.2 Quantification over facts and propositions

If fact-terms are not referential, how should we understand the quantifier inferences? It won't do to simply insist that they are not valid, not only since they quite clearly are valid, but also because quantification over facts and propositions plays an important role in communication, and shouldn't just be tossed aside. Instead, it seems to me, we should accept something like the following view of quantification in natural language. This view is congenial to a non-referential picture of that-clauses, but it can be motivated quite independently from it. Whether or not it is the best such view and whether or not it is the correct

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<sup>13</sup>See [Bach, 1997], [Moltmann, 2003], [Schiffer, 2003], [King, 2002], [Rosefeldt, 2008], [Hofweber, 2016b] and many more.

view of quantification in natural language is again something reasonable people can disagree about, but let us simply see where it would take us.<sup>14</sup> The view is the following: Although quantifiers are often used in just the way indicated above, where they make a claim about a domain of entities, they are not always used this way. Quantifiers are used in at least two different ways, they systematically have two readings. One is the more or less standard one, which I will call the *domain conditions reading*, since when we employ it we impose a condition on the domain over which the quantifier ranges. When I say ‘Something is in my shoe.’ I make an assertion that is true just in case the domain of all objects contains at least one thing which has a certain feature: being in my shoe. But quantifiers also have another reading. On this further reading they are used for their inferential role. In the case of ‘something’ the inferential role is simply to be able to infer from  $F(t)$  that something is  $F$ . ‘ $t$ ’ can hereby be any expression of the appropriate syntactic type, with no regard to its semantic function. ‘something’ on this use is more like a placeholder for a particular part of the sentence, in the sense that one can always validly replace a term ‘ $t$ ’ with ‘something’ without going from truth to falsity. Let us call this reading the *inferential reading*.

Quantifiers so understood thus have two different readings. In this sense they would be similar to, for example, plural expressions like ‘four philosophers’. The sentence

- (6) Four philosophers carried two pianos.

has a number of different readings depending on how one understands the plural phrases ‘four philosophers’ and ‘two pianos’. Each of them has a collective reading — four philosophers as a group — and a distributive reading: four philosophers each. On ordinary occasions of communication one would likely utter this sentence meaning that a group of four philosophers carried one piano, and then another one, but the other readings are also available: each of four philosophers carried a group of two pianos etc.. And similarly for quantifiers: both readings are available, but on many occasions one or the other will be prominent, depending on how and where the quantifier is used.

That quantifiers have these two readings can be motivated quite independently of our issue of talk about facts.<sup>15</sup> There are a number of quantifier inferences that seem to be valid, but that also seem to be hard to understand on the domain conditions reading of quantifiers. On the inferential reading, however, they are completely trivial, as

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<sup>14</sup>Alternative views compatible with non-referential that-clauses can be found, for example, in [Schiffer, 1987] and [Prior, 1971].

<sup>15</sup>I have argued for this view of quantification independently of our main topic here in chapter 3 of [Hofweber, 2016b].

they seem to be:

- (7) I need an assistant. Thus I need something.
- (8) I want a unicorn. Thus I want something.

To bring out the two readings, consider this example:

- (9) Everything exists.

On the one hand, (9) seems to be true. All the things we quantify over, all the things in the domain of quantification, exist. Whatever the world contains, it all exists. But on the other hand, (9) seems to be clearly false: we know many counterexamples to this universal claim. We know many cases of things that don't exist: Santa doesn't exist, the Easter Bunny doesn't exist, etc.. So, how can everything exist when we know of things that don't exist? The tension arises, this view of quantification maintains, since two readings of 'everything' are at work here. On the domain conditions reading it is true that everything exists, while on the inferential reading it is false. The inferential reading does not admit of counterexamples, but the domain conditions reading can allow for true instances of 't does not exist', as long as 't' does not refer to an object in the domain.

Whether this view of quantification is correct is a topic that reasonable people can again disagree about, just as about whether that-clauses and fact-terms are referential. It is an issue about the function of quantifiers in natural language and ordinary communication. It is tied to what need we have in communication, to which phrases in our language do something other than referring, and so on. None of those are obvious or trivial. I won't aim to try to settle this issue about natural language here, of course, but merely investigate what connections it might have to larger metaphysical questions.

Let us thus take this view of quantification seriously for the moment. Quantifiers are polysemous, they can be used in two different ways: their domain conditions reading and their inferential reading. The domain condition reading is the familiar one, and the contribution to the truth conditions that a quantifier makes on this reading is also familiar: in the simple case of 'something' there has to be some thing or entity in the domain that has the feature attributed to it. But what about the inferential role reading? What contribution to the truth conditions does it make such that the quantified sentence has the inferential role for which we want it? Focusing just on a simple case again, the inferential role of 'something' is that any instance is supposed to imply it. That is to say, any instance 'F(t)' is supposed to imply 'something is F'. An instance here is understood simply grammatically, where 't' is an expression in our language of the proper

syntactic type that can be combined with a predicate ‘F’ to form a sentence. Now, what contribution to the truth conditions would give ‘something’ just this inferential role? Here there is a simplest and in a sense optimal solution. Before we get to it, consider first the even simpler case of wanting a sentence that has the inferential behavior of being implied by sentences A and also B. Here, too, there is an optimal solution: the desired sentence has to be truth conditionally equivalent to the disjunction of A and B. It could be the disjunction itself,  $A \vee B$ , or some other sentence equivalent to it. Those are the strongest truth conditions that have the desired inferential behavior. The same holds for our case with inferential readings of quantifiers. The strongest truth conditions that give ‘something is F’ the inferential role that any instance ‘F(t)’ implies it is being truth conditionally equivalent to the disjunction of all the instances that imply it. Those instances are all the instances of grammatical expressions in our own language that form a sentence ‘F(t)’. Thus the strongest truth conditions and the optimal solution to our problem of what truth conditions give a quantified sentence its inferential role is this: being truth conditionally equivalent to the disjunction of all instances F(t) in our language, which we can write as  $\bigvee F(t)$ . And since the optimal solution to the problem what truth conditions give the quantifier the inferential role for which we want it, it is not unreasonable to think that those are indeed the truth conditions of the inferential reading of the quantifier.

For ‘everything’ correspondingly the truth conditions on its inferential reading are the conjunction of all the instances, giving ‘everything is F’ the inferential role of implying each instance ‘F(t)’, which we can write as  $\bigwedge F(t)$ . However, this can only be an outline of what the truth conditions of the inferential reading of quantifiers are in full. I neglected contextual contributions to content, I didn’t make the notion of an instance fully precise, and simplified in various other ways, looking only at the simplest cases, not generalized quantifiers, and so on. The treatment of inferential quantifiers outlined here can thus be seen as nothing more than an outline. In fact, I simplified in certain ways that do matter in the end, but for present purposes this outline should suffice. The more realistic and proper treatment of what the truth conditions of quantified statements on their internal reading should be taken to be spelled out in detail and without simplifying in the way we did here in chapters 3 and 9 of [Hofweber, 2016b], but the details are not really essential for our main goal here, and they are also too involved to get into now. I will thus leave them aside and work just with the outlined version given above. We can also think of them as substitutional quantifiers for present purposes,<sup>16</sup> although that is not completely correct on the proper formulation. None of the details are

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<sup>16</sup>See, for example, [Kripke, 1976].



essential for the main point to come, and that's the point I would like to get to now.

On the inferential reading of the quantifier the inference from 'that p is surprising' to 'something is surprising' is valid. 'that p' is a grammatical instance of 't is surprising', which implies the quantified sentence on the inferential reading. This inference is valid whether or not 'that p' is referential. If 'that p' is referential then the inference is also valid on the domain conditions reading, but even if it is not referential, the inference is valid on the inferential reading. Thus using quantifiers on their inferential reading in these cases goes together nicely with the non-referential picture of that-clauses and fact terms. On the other hand, the domain conditions reading goes together nicely with the referential picture. If fact-terms aim to pick out entities in the domain, then quantified statements that quantify over facts should correspondingly make claims about that domain as well. These two combinations are two ways in which our talk about facts might be coherent. On the one hand, fact terms might be referential and quantifiers are used in their domain conditions reading, on the other hand, they might be non-referential and quantifiers are used in their inferential reading.

How quantifiers are used, that is, which reading is employed in a particular utterance, is something that the speaker is in charge of, or at least they can be. So, the claim isn't and shouldn't be that all uses of certain quantifiers are one way or another, only that on standard occasions, or in general, they are used that way. In particular, we can and at least within philosophy often do, use utterances of the sentence 'There are facts' to assert that the domain of entities contains facts, and thus to use the quantifier in its domain conditions reading on this occasion. We can also use that sentence with the inferential reading of the quantifier, which is a mostly trivial truth, while the domain conditions reading of it is not, but a claim related to ontology. The former is immediately implied by 'That  $2+2=4$  is a fact', but the latter, domain conditions reading, is not. How we use quantifiers can be up to us. The question is how we commonly use them. Similarly for being referential or non-referential. Speakers can use a term that doesn't have the semantic function to refer with the intention to refer to something, and they can use referential terms that semantically refer to one thing with the intention to refer to another. But whether that-clauses in general are used referentially is the question that matters here and that is controversial.

To sum it up, we can call *internalism* the view that that-clauses and fact-terms are in general used non-referentially, and quantifiers over facts are in general used in their inferential reading. On the other hand, *externalism* is the view that, in general, that-clauses and fact-terms are used referentially, and quantifiers over facts are, in general, used

in their domain conditions reading. This terminology, employing the internal-external metaphor, seems appropriate, since on the referential picture talk about facts is about something external to the language — a domain of entities which is presumably simply there, waiting to be referred to — while on the non-referential picture talk about facts is not about some language external domain of things, and quantification over facts is simply inferentially relating to the instances internal to ones own language.

Both views are simply views about what we in general do when we talk about facts. To decide between them we need to look at issues about language, the role of quantifiers in communication, the substitution behavior of fact terms, and so on and so forth. None of these issues seem to presuppose anything substantial about metaphysics. They are metaphysically innocent questions about our actual use of that-clauses, fact terms, and quantifiers. What the right thing is to say here should again be an issue where reasonable people can disagree. Maybe the evidence will point one way or another. And which way it will go will to a large extent be an empirical issue. What do we do when we talk about facts? That is a question about what we in fact do, and although it is not clear how to settle it, it is clear what kinds of considerations will be relevant and at least many of them will be empirical considerations.

But here is the rub: the question whether idealism is true is closely tied to the question how this issue in the philosophy of language turns out. In the next sections I hope to make clear how and why that is so. After that we will discuss how there could possibly be such a connection, one between broadly empirical issues about our own language and a metaphysical issue like idealism.

### **3.3 Internalism and structural ineffability**

Whether internalism or externalism is true about our talk about facts is a question that is largely empirical and it should be seen as a largely open one, at least for those without prior theoretical commitments in the philosophy of language. But suppose for the moment that internalism turns out to be correct. Suppose that our talk about facts and propositions is as the internalist picture has it. What then becomes of our question about the harmony of thought and reality and its connection to idealism? This question was a question about whether there is a guaranteed harmony between the form of our thoughts and the structure of reality. And this question in turn is closely tied to the question whether there are structurally ineffable facts, and if not, whether such facts are ruled out for a reason or whether they merely don't happen to obtain. There is a straightforward argument that shows that if internalism is true than such harmony is guaranteed. Internalism,

simply a view about our talk about facts, guarantees that ineffable facts are ruled out and our minds and reality are in harmony. The argument is simply this: If internalism is true then our talk about facts is in accordance with the internalist picture, which is to say fact terms are non-referential and quantifiers are used in their inferential reading. This internalist picture applies to our present discussion of facts, and it therefore applies to our question whether or not our minds and reality are in structural harmony, i.e. the question whether or not there are any structurally ineffable facts. The thesis that there are such facts we can call *the structural ineffability thesis*, either for facts or for propositions:

(10) There are structurally ineffable facts.

(11) There are structurally ineffable propositions.

which contrasts with *the structural effability thesis*, which in turn says that

(12) Every fact is structurally effable.

(13) Every proposition is structurally effable.

The structural effability thesis claims that every fact or proposition is such that it can be represented in thought or language with a representation that has one of the forms that our representations have. The effability thesis contains quantification over facts or propositions, and according to internalism, such quantified sentences involve the inferential reading of the quantifier. This reading, in turn, is truth conditionally equivalent to the conjunction of all the instances in our own language. Thus the structural effability thesis is truth conditionally equivalent to one big conjunction. In the case of propositions it is simply the conjunction over all instances:

(14)  $\bigwedge$  that p is structurally effable.

While in the case of facts it is the slightly more complex conjunction, generalizing over just the facts or true propositions, which can be stated as follows:

(15)  $\bigwedge$  if that p is a fact then that p is structurally effable.

No matter which case we consider, the result is the same. These conjunctions are true just in case each conjunct is true. But every conjunct is just an instance, in our own language: that snow is white is structurally effable, that grass is green is structurally effable, and so on. Each one of these instances is true. Some instances might be very long and complex, involving billions of words. Such instances might

not in fact be representable by any human being. The representations involved are just too long; our brains would run out of space and our lives would be over before we would be done representing them. But even in these cases the facts are structurally effable. The form or structure of our representations is enough to represent them, even if the size of our brains or the length of our lives is not. The forms of our representations are thus good enough to represent every fact.<sup>17</sup>

And this is no accident, it has to be so. On the relevant reading, it can't be that there are some facts that are structurally ineffable. This last sentence can be understood in two ways, corresponding to either more or different facts, or else less or different representational power of our minds. Of course, we could be worse off and not be able to represent some straightforward facts like the fact that snow is white. If we were all brain-dead then we couldn't represent that fact. But the issue is not how we might be worse while the facts remain otherwise the same, but rather whether the facts could be different while we remain the same so that some facts are now structurally ineffable. Could there be facts with a structure that would not match any of the forms of our thoughts as we now have them? Could it be that there are some facts such that our present forms of representation are not good enough for them? The answer is again: no. In this very question just asked I used a quantifier over facts. Such quantification, according to internalism, is equivalent to the disjunction over the instances, our instances. That question is thus equivalent to the question whether it could be that ( $\bigvee$  that p is structurally ineffable). The instances for 'that p' here are just the same as before: all the instances in our present language. And keeping fixed what we in fact can represent, it is false that this could be. Changing what we can represent it could be true, of course, as in the case where we are all brain-dead or otherwise lose our representational abilities. But in the case where we keep our representational capacities the same, and just wonder how much more complicated the world could be, the answer is that there could not be such facts. All of the ones that are, and all of the ones that could be, are structurally effable.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>A different argument that structural ineffability is impossible is given by Krasimira Filcheva in [Filcheva, 2017]. Filcheva argues that structural ineffability is conceptually ruled out, and that no metaphysical conclusions like idealism follow from this.

<sup>18</sup>How internal quantification interacts with modality is discussed in more detail in [Hofweber, 2006]. The issue is a little more complicated once inferential quantifiers are formulated to allow for context sensitive instances, but the conclusion remains the same even then.

### 3.4 Internalism and idealism

Structurally ineffable facts are thus ruled out, not by accident, but for a reason. No fact is or can be structurally ineffable. Thus the facts and our thoughts are in harmony: the structure of the facts exactly corresponds to the form of our thoughts. Reality, on one way of understanding it, is just the totality of facts, and thus reality so understood is in structural harmony with our human minds. Reality as the totality of facts is thus tied to us in just this way. There is a guarantee that our minds are structurally good enough to present every fact that does or could obtain. Or to put it differently, the totality of facts is constrained by our form of thought: it doesn't and can't go beyond it. Thus we are central to reality understood as the totality of facts: the limits of our human thoughts are the limits of reality so understood. The overall story of reality will have to mention this connection between our minds and reality. And thus strong idealism is true. We might not be central to the totality of things, and thus ontological idealism might well be false. But we are central to the totality of facts, in that our forms of thoughts are limiting for what facts do and could obtain.

Idealism is thus true; not ontological idealism, but alethic idealism. In general, we might have nothing to do with what there is, but we are central for what is the case. Not because the obtaining of facts is, in general, tied to us, but because the range of what facts can in principle obtain is tied to us. And these two ways in which facts can depend on us should be clearly distinguished. Let us say that a fact *truth depends* on us just in case its obtaining depends on us. In this sense facts in general do not depend on us. The totality of facts *range depends* on us just in case the range of all the facts, that is, which facts can in principle obtain, is tied to us. And in this sense facts depend on us, assuming internalism. We can call *conceptual idealism* the version of alethic idealism which holds that reality as the totality of facts is range dependent on us.<sup>19</sup> The question whether our minds and reality are in harmony is central to formulating this sense of dependence. Reality depends on our minds not because what facts obtain depends on us, but because what the range of the facts is depends on us: all facts that do or could obtain must at least in their structure harmonize with our forms of thought. The argument given in the above section aims to

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<sup>19</sup>The name 'conceptual idealism' is also used by Nicholas Rescher for a different view in [Rescher, 1973]. This reuse of names for versions of idealism is unfortunately hard to avoid given how many forms of idealism have been defended and named in the past. 'Conceptual idealism' is a fitting name for the view defended here, since it concerns the propositional or fact-like aspect of reality, i.e. what is represented conceptually in a full thought or judgment. Those aspects of reality are not independent of our conceptual representations, according to the view, while other ones might well be.

show that internalism implies conceptual idealism. The structures of the facts are tied to the forms of our thoughts so that there is, and has to be, complete harmony between them. And that is idealism.

This argument must seem highly suspicious. How could considerations merely about our own language show that there is a harmony between our language and reality, or correspondingly between our minds and reality? All we did is look at our minds and language, reality didn't play any role at all. But to show that our minds and reality are in harmony it would seem that one has to look at two things — our minds on the one hand, and reality on the other — and show that these two go together in the right way. But it can't be, or so is natural to think, that one can just look at one of the two sides and from that alone argue that the two go together.

Furthermore, it is natural to think that it can't be that one can draw metaphysical conclusions simply from considerations about language. The above argument must be mistaken, since it would need to overcome the insurmountable language-metaphysics gap: the impossibility of drawing metaphysical conclusions from premises about our language alone. From considerations about our language one can't draw conclusions about what reality is like, only about how we represent reality to be. And thus the above argument must be mistaken. To be sure, one could argue for metaphysical conclusions from considerations about language together with the further assumption that certain representations in that language represent reality correctly. But I didn't make any assumptions about which sentences are true, only what the semantic function and general use of that-clauses and quantifiers is. And such considerations are merely about the goals of what we hope to do, and those alone aren't a guide to larger features of reality. The above argument must therefore be wrong, and there are a couple of places where it might be tempting to argue that it goes wrong there. Or the argument must not be based on as innocent assumptions as I made it out to be. Maybe I smuggled in some idealism at the beginning in what I claimed were only largely empirical considerations about our own language. But I will not draw these conclusions here. Instead I hope to show that these reservations are mistaken. The main argument given here does indeed assume only something about our own language, something largely empirical, and it does not smuggle in any metaphysical assumptions. Nonetheless, idealism follows. Idealism follows simply from considerations about our own language, on largely empirical grounds. Idealism can be established on largely empirical grounds, by thinking about our own language, and the language-metaphysics gap can be overcome, or so I hope to make clear now.

## 4 How the argument is possible

The argument for idealism given above assumes internalism and concludes idealism. Internalism is a position about what we do when we talk about facts, and as such a position in broadly the philosophy of language. Idealism, on the other hand, is a view in metaphysics, one about the metaphysical centrality of minds in reality. It must seem that no such argument could possibly succeed. To see how this argument is possible after all, we need to first get clear on how one could possibly legitimately draw conclusions about what reality is like from considerations about our language alone. It is clear that one can draw conclusions about reality from our language together with the assumption that certain sentences are true. True sentences are a guide to reality. But it is quite another thing to draw such conclusions from language alone, as was done above, without assuming that certain sentences are true.<sup>20</sup> Facts about language alone only tells us how we aim to represent reality, not how reality (otherwise) is, or so it must seem. But this, I want to argue, is mistaken. Considerations about language alone allow us to legitimately draw certain conclusions about what reality is like, not just how we represent reality to be. How this can be is crucial for getting clear on how the above argument could possibly be correct.

Consider again the question whether that-clauses are referring expressions. Being non-referential can be understood in two different ways: either about language alone or else about the relationship between language and reality. One way to be non-referential is paradigmatically exhibited by an empty name: a proper name that fails to refer to anything. Such an empty name has a semantic function — the function to refer to an object — but it fails to carry out that function. It is non-referential even though it aims to refer, since what it aims to refer to is not there. Whether a phrase is non-referential in this sense is not about language alone, but also about reality. But other expressions are non-referential in a different sense. Such expressions have a completely different semantic function than referring. They include expressions of a grammatical category quite different from that of a name or singular term, but they also include phrases that can appear in subject position. Take ‘nothing’ as an example. It is a quantifier, and quantifiers are not referring expressions. Their semantic function is to make claims about a domain of entities, at least in the most familiar case, which I will use here to illustrate the main point about reference. ‘nothing’ is non-referential, not in the sense that it aims to

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<sup>20</sup>Heather Dyke calls drawing such conclusions ‘the representational fallacy’ in [Dyke, 2008]. Although I agree that this is often illegitimate, it isn’t always so, as I hope to make clear here.

refer, but fails to achieve its aim, but in the sense that it does something completely different semantically than referring. And quantifiers are not alone in this regard. On most views about natural language most expressions are not referential in just this sense. They include expressions like ‘very’, ‘many’, ‘if’, ‘few dogs who bark’ and so on and so forth. Their semantic function might be similar or different to each other, but they do have in common that they are non-referential in the sense that they semantically do something other than referring.

If internalism is true then that-clauses are non-referential in the second sense, the same sense in which ‘nothing’ is non-referential. That-clauses do something other than referring semantically. But this has consequences about what reality is like. Let me illustrate this first with ‘nothing’. Let us call, by stipulation, ‘The Nothing’ whatever the word ‘nothing’ refers to, if anything. Is there such a thing as The Nothing? We can conclude, from considerations about language alone, that there is no such thing. ‘nothing’ is non-referential, since it does something other than referring semantically, and so none of the things that there are is The Nothing. The Nothing just was, by stipulation, whatever the phrase ‘nothing’ refers to. But that phrase does not refer to anything, since it does something else semantically than referring. So, whatever things there might be, whatever reality contains, none of it is The Nothing. Reality might contain all kinds of things, but we know at least this: none of it is The Nothing. And that none of it is The Nothing was determined by considerations about language alone, together with a stipulation of what The Nothing is.

Similarly with that-clauses and talk about facts or propositions. Facts, if there are any at all, are just the kinds of things like the fact that snow is white, the fact that  $2+2=4$ , and so on. But if internalism is true, then that-clauses as well as fact-terms like ‘the fact that snow is white’ and ‘the fact that  $2+2=4$ ’ are non-referential. They are not non-referential because they aim to refer, but fail, since the entities they aim to refer to aren’t there. Rather they are non-referential since they do something else semantically than referring. So, whatever things there might be, whatever entities might be part of reality, none of them is the fact that snow is white. To make this clear, just consider the last part of the last sentence just written: ‘none of them is the fact that snow is white’. The quantifier ‘none of them’ ranges over the domain of things on its intended use, the things that are part of reality. But ‘the fact that snow is white’ as it was just used, according to internalism, is not a referring expression. It does something different than picking out some entity or thing in the domain. Thus none of these things in the domain is picked out by this phrase, and so none of them is the fact that snow is white. And similarly for all the other examples of facts. Whatever things there might be, none of them is the fact that snow is white, and none of them is The Nothing. If internalism about talk



about facts is indeed correct then none of the things contained in reality are facts. No facts exist, there is no ontology of facts, and facts are not entities or things. There could be all kinds of things, but whatever they might be, none of them is a fact, again assuming internalism.<sup>21</sup> But this is a metaphysical conclusion drawn solely from considerations about our own language. Internalism guarantees that there are no facts, understood as involving the domain conditions reading of the quantifier, and it guarantees that facts do not exist. Simply from considerations about our own language we are thus able to draw a conclusion about reality.

This bridges the language-metaphysics gap, at least for this particular case. But it does so in a different way than the way that is objectionable. The objectionable connection was to conclude from our attempts to represent the world that the world is more or less as we represent it. That poses an insurmountable gap, since no guarantee can be given, without further argument, that we succeed in what we aim to do when we represent the world. Examples of such connections would be arguments that hold that we should believe in an A-theory of time, since we represent temporal reality in a tensed language.<sup>22</sup> Or we should believe in an ontology of events, since our language is full of event terms, and so on. Any such positive connection will have to be established via the truth of our representations, not simply via our attempts to represent this way. And thus such a view can't be established from considerations about language alone. But the direct connection between language and metaphysics defended here is of a different kind, one that is at first only negative. It holds that reality doesn't contain facts, since fact talk in general is not about any entities. This is also about what reality is like, but negative in that it holds that reality does not contain facts as entities. Such a connection is a language-world connection, and one that proceeds purely from what our language is like to what reality is like. It does not assume that our talk about facts is true, only what we aim to do with such talk. Negative connections might not seem as consequential as positive ones, but this doesn't have to be so. To establish, at first purely negatively, that reality does not contain an ontology of facts has a number of

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<sup>21</sup>It is no help to try to avoid this conclusion by insisting that one takes a fact just to be an ordered pair of an object and a property, or some other specified entity. There might well be ordered pairs of objects and properties, but if internalism is true then those are not facts. The fact that John is tall is not the ordered pair of John and the property of being tall. The fact term is not referential, and thus does not pick out any object in the domain, including the ordered pair of John and being tall, which I assume here to be a member of the domain. And the same holds for any other fact term. No entity in the domain can be identical to the fact that p, no matter which instance of 'p' we consider.

<sup>22</sup>See [Ludlow, 1999] who defends a connection of this kind.

significant further consequences. Although the most direct and most immediate bridging of the language-metaphysics gap is only negative, the negative conclusion we get directly has a number of further positive consequences, including a connection to idealism, or so I hope to argue in this paper.

Another way to see how these considerations can bridge the language-metaphysics gap is this: Some questions about reality can be answered simply by thinking about the language we employ when we ask that question. When we ask whether there are any facts, i.e. whether reality contains besides various objects also facts, then we are asking a question about reality, what it contains and what it is like. And in this case we can see from considerations about our own language alone that this question has a negative answer: no, there are no facts. We can see that that-clauses and fact terms are not in the business of referring to entities, since we can see by thinking about our language alone that internalism is correct, and we can similarly see that quantifiers have an internal, inferential reading as well as an external, domain conditions reading. If so, then the question as it is intended employs the external reading of the quantifier. But the non-referentiality of that-clauses and fact-terms guarantees that external quantification over facts comes up empty: the domain does not contain any facts. Thus the question we asked has a negative answer, and we can see this from considerations about our language alone, even though the question was a question about what reality is like. Focusing on the question itself we can see how it was possible to answer it by thinking about our language, in particular the language employed in the question. And thus the question we did in fact ask can indeed be answered this way. Whether it was the right question to ask is, of course, not settled by this, and this is the next issue we need to look at.

## 5 But is it really idealism?

Idealism was understood above as the view that minds, and our human minds in particular, are metaphysically central to reality. The argument given so far aimed to show that our minds are metaphysically central to reality understood as the totality of facts, but our minds might not be central to reality understood as the totality of things. We are central to all that is the case, since all that is, or can be, the case is limited by our forms of conceptual representation. Reality must be in structural harmony with our minds, and this gives rise to a sense of dependence of reality on our minds. The totality of facts is range-dependent on our minds, since the range of facts that might obtain is limited by the structure of our conceptual thought. Internalism about

talk about facts supports this conclusion, since it guarantees that this harmony obtains. And we can see how a position about language like internalism could have metaphysical consequences, and idealism might be among them.

But besides all this, it must seem that the whole argument is a cheat or a trick. It doesn't seem like the right kind of argument that could support idealism. And this is the natural way to feel about it, I know the feeling myself. After all, the question is about the harmony between two different things: the facts and our conceptual representations of them in thought or language. No argument looking at just one or the two should be able to conclude that both of them connect in a certain way. But I want to maintain nonetheless that the above argument does indeed establish idealism. The reason ultimately is that internalism shows that the totality of facts and our representations of the facts are not two independent things. And since they are connected, looking at one can inform us about the other. Internalism is not merely a view about our language, but instead incorporates a larger metaphysical picture of the fact-like or proposition-like aspect of reality. And it is now in order to not just argue that the language-metaphysics gap can be bridged, but to make clear how these considerations about our language indeed support idealism. In this section I would like to work this out by considering a series of objections, why they are misguided, and why idealism indeed follows from all this.

The first objection to the main argument is that if internalism is indeed correct then idealism was badly stated above. Internalism guarantees that there are no facts, that is to say, facts do not exist. And if facts don't exist then the totality of all facts doesn't exist either. But then, how can it be legitimate to think of reality as the totality of facts? And how can it be legitimate to think of idealism as alethic idealism, i.e. as a position concerning our place in reality understood as the totality of facts? If internalism is indeed true then it was a mistake to think of reality in these two ways. And consequently it was a mistake to think of idealism as being either ontological idealism or alethic idealism. Idealism must be understood differently, the objection continues. Only on such an alternative understanding of idealism, one that does not involve talk of facts, but something else instead, would establishing idealism show that our minds are central to reality. Thus the above argument misses its target, especially if it is correct. If internalism were true then this undermines the given formulation of idealism rather than establish idealism.

Although this objection might at first seem compelling, it is nonetheless mistaken. First, it would be a mistake to think that simply because facts are not entities that it is thereby illegitimate to characterize real-

ity as the totality of facts. Almost the opposite is the case. Those who think that facts exist must also hold that the totality of things, which is the totality of what exists, includes the totality of facts, since the facts are just some of the things or entities which exist. Thus there is no substantial distinction between reality as the totality of things and reality as the totality of facts: one is subsumed under the other. If a substantial distinction is to be made in this regard — what exists is one thing, but what is true or what is the case is a substantial further issue — then facts must themselves not be part of what exists. Facts obtain, but they do not exist. This conception of facts maintains that it is perfectly legitimate to think of reality as the totality of facts. It is one of possibly several ways to conceive of reality, but a legitimate one nonetheless, even though there is no ontology of facts and even though what exists does not contain the facts as one of its parts or sub-domains. Whether or not this view of facts is right or wrong is, of course, a further question, one closely tied to the question whether internalism or externalism about talk about facts is correct. But it shouldn't be rejected simply because it fails to ontologize the fact-like aspect of reality. The picture just is the picture that the totality of what exists is not all there is to reality. There is also another way to think of reality, one that goes beyond what exists, and concerns what is the case or which facts obtain. Any such picture must hold that the facts are not part of what exists if there really is a further aspect to reality besides its ontology. The idealist position considered here will agree: simply because facts don't exist doesn't mean that what facts obtain isn't an appropriate way to think of reality. And if it is correct that there is a guaranteed harmony between our thoughts and the facts, then that is still idealism, understood as a metaphysical view about the place of our minds in reality.

Still, the worry remains that the idealist only wins in letter, but not in spirit. Maybe we are central to the facts, given internalism, but that just shows that the real metaphysical question is not about the facts, but about something else. Maybe the real question isn't about reality understood so broadly that even the totality of facts on an internalist conception of it would count as one way to think of reality. Maybe we need to hone in on a different, more metaphysically appropriate conception of reality, or at least focus on some other, more suitable question. When we ask whether or not all the facts are tied to us, then we are in a sense too involved in the question itself, assuming internalism. We are then simply generalizing over the instances in our own language and it is thus no wonder that we are central. But maybe there is a better question to ask, one that isn't so closely tied to us and that more properly captures the real issue tied to idealism. Let's call *the proper question* the question we should be asking when

we ask about idealism. Internalism shows, or so the objection, that the proper question is not to be asked in terms of facts. Internalism does not answer the proper question, but rather points to an error in the original articulation of what we took to be the proper question. All internalism shows is that we need to formulate the proper question differently, not what the answer to that question is.

But how should we state the question instead? The situation won't change if instead of asking about the totality of facts we ask about the totality of truths or the totality of true propositions. First, whatever reasons we will have for holding that internalism is true about talk about facts will also carry over to holding internalism for talk about truths or propositions. The relevant arguments for and against internalism are in essence the same in each of these cases. Second, there are close connections between the notions of a truth, a true proposition, and a fact, which basically guarantee that either internalism or else externalism must be correct for all of them together. For every fact there is a truth, and for every truth a fact. And for every true proposition there is a truth, and so on. Whether facts are identical to truths, or just correspond to them, is thereby left open, but the correspondence has a status close to a conceptual truth. Thus if there are structurally ineffable facts there will be structurally ineffable truths. And if all facts are structurally effable, so will be all truths. Changing from talk about facts to talk about truths thus gets us nothing new.

Or we could try something more radical. Instead of talking about facts, we could simply talk about facts\*, and we could make sure that talk about facts\* is as an externalist would have it. Then it can't be argued that the facts\* correspond to our representations as the facts do, and thus we could try to formulate idealism via talk about facts\*. What facts\* are supposed to be is not clear so far, but the thought behind the move is to free facts from their connection to our representations, and to introduce an alternative notion that can play the role of facts without such a connection. In particular, for every fact there should be a fact\*, but there might also be more facts\*. Reality, or reality\*, should then be understood, on one way of thinking of it, as the totality of facts\*, and idealism (or idealism\*) as the view that we are central to reality\*.

But none of this will work. Uncontroversially, we can extend the notion of a fact to the notion of a fact\*, which might go beyond the facts. But the question remains why anyone would care about the parts that go beyond the facts, and why talking about them should be relevant for the characterization of reality or idealism. To consider an extreme case, take a fact<sup>+</sup> to be either a fact or a golden bathtub. The notion of a fact<sup>+</sup> extends that of a fact, but why should we care

about the facts+? To be sure, we rightly care about facts, as well as about golden bathtubs, but we do so in very different ways. The facts correspond to truths, and truth is the goal of inquiry, the aim of belief and so on. Golden bathtubs have very different things to be said for them. It would be a real change of topic to wonder about reality<sup>+</sup> and idealism<sup>+</sup> when defined in terms of fact<sup>+</sup>. And although fact<sup>+</sup> is an extreme version, it is not clear why fact\* would do any better. Why should we care about the facts\* that go beyond the facts? We might care about them, as we care about golden bathtubs, but why would we care about them in the same way as we care about facts? They would not be part of the goal of inquiry, since they do not correspond to a truth. And they would not be the aim of our beliefs, for the same reason. Of course, they do correspond to a truth\* and are the aim of belief\*. But why would it be better to have beliefs\* that aim at the truth\* rather than beliefs that aim at the truth. And similarly, it would be unclear why we should think that the proper question is about reality\*, and not simply about reality.

To make a similar point from a different angle, let us consider whether or not the truth of internalism for talk about facts, truths, and propositions, should be seen as unearthing a limitation of ours. Does internalism limit us in only being able to talk about the effable facts, or does it provide an insight into what reality is like? To see it as a limitation would likely bring with it the recommendation to replace it with something better: talk of facts\* or something else. But replacing talk of facts with talk of facts\* alone won't do, we will need to replace a whole family of notions with their starred analogs: truth\*, belief\*, and so on. Such a replacement might or might not be possible, but even if it is, would it be rational and reasonable? Could we have a reason to replace our beliefs that aim at the truth with states that aim at something else, truth\*? And here it appears that we do not have such a reason.<sup>23</sup> Any truth\* that is not a truth would be something completely different, something that isn't a fact, isn't a content, isn't a proposition, and so on. Belief is perfect in what it aims for, the truth, and belief\* can have its aim just as well. But why we should ditch belief and replace it by belief\* is not answered by this. There is no reason to replace belief throughout, since it is perfect at what it is doing. There might be a reason\* to make the change, but from our present place, having beliefs who aim at the truth and are responsive to reasons, reason\* should have no pull on us over and above reason. Thus there is no rational way to abandon those notions altogether for a replacement, and with them to switch our proper concern from reality

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<sup>23</sup>At least no such reason of the right kind. As usual, I might have pragmatic reasons, like being offered a good amount of money, to do so.

to a replacement: reality\*.<sup>24</sup>

All this highlights that there is a close circle of notions tied to broadly propositional things: facts, truth, belief, knowledge, reason, and so on, which can't be rationally replaced. What we should rightly find out is the truth, and with it what the facts are. Thus our proper concern is reality as the totality of facts, not some substitute of it. And similarly, idealism should be seen as concerning our place in reality as the totality of facts, whether or not internalism is true for talk about facts.

Instead of seeing internalism as a limitation I would like to suggest that it gives us an insight into what reality is like. We did state the proper question all along when we ask whether there are structurally ineffable facts. Reality can be understood as the totality of facts, even if and especially when facts are not among the things that exist. So understood reality is tied to us, since there are no structurally ineffable facts, in principle and for a reason, assuming internalism. That we asked this question concerning idealism by talking about facts is not undermined by internalism about talk about facts. The question remains intact as the proper question. Instead, internalism points to its answer, and that answer is idealism. Instead of thinking of internalism as a limitation for what we can say, we should think of it as incorporating a metaphysical picture of the propositional or fact-like aspect of reality. And this picture holds that what there is, what exists, might well be simply there, with no involvement on our part. Furthermore, facts obtain, but the totality of facts is not simply there waiting for us to represent them. Which facts obtain is not due to us, of course, but what the range is of the facts which can in principle obtain is tied to us: they must be representable by a representation of the kind we have available. It is hard to make sense of a view that holds that facts obtain, and for each fact, with the obvious exceptions, that it obtains independently of us, but still, reality as the totality of facts is not independent of us. It might seem incoherent to hold such a view, but considerations about harmony show how this can coherently be, and they unearth a sense of dependence that shows this picture to be coherent. The totality of facts range-depend on us, but facts do not truth-depend on us. We are not involved, in general, in which facts obtain, but we are involved in the range of facts that can obtain. This range-dependence holds since any fact that can obtain has to be representable with a thought of the form that our thoughts have, and this limits what reality can be like. Range-dependence is, in essence, the dependence requirement that arises from harmony being required.

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<sup>24</sup>For a similar issue about replacing truth, for a different reason, see [Scharp, 2013], and for some critical remarks on such projects, see [Hofweber, 2010].

And thus considering the harmony of thought and reality gives rise to a sense of dependence of reality on us, and furthermore to idealism. This defense of idealism meets the constraints listed above on page 4: It explicitly formulates idealism and whatever notion of dependence it might rely on, since range dependences is explicitly stated. It is compatible with what we generally know to be true, since conceptual idealism does not hold that the obtaining of the facts depends on us, only the range of the facts does. And it is supported with an argument, via a defense of internalism.

The overall metaphysics of all of reality will have to bring out this connection between us and reality. The metaphysical story of reality will have to discuss us in the main text, and not just mention us in a footnote. And thus we are metaphysically central to reality. Our minds are central not because reality is mental or constructed by our minds, but because there is a guaranteed structural harmony between which facts could in principle obtain and which facts can be represented by us.

## 6 Conclusion

How such a version of idealism works more precisely as a metaphysics is largely left open by what I have said in this paper. This paper doesn't aim to work out the idealism that would follow, nor did it aim to defend internalism, which would imply it. My goal here was simply to argue that a strong anthropocentric form of idealism can be defended from an unexpected angle: via a defense of internalism, a position merely about what we do when we talk about facts. Even though the assumption in this argument is only about our own language, nonetheless substantial metaphysical consequences follow. The language-metaphysics gap can be overcome in this case, and metaphysical conclusions can be drawn from considerations about our own natural language alone. Whether the internalist position in the philosophy of language is correct is very much a substantial further question. But I do not take internalism simply to be a possible view that should be investigated, I have defended it on grounds purely tied to considerations in the philosophy of language in other work, in particular in [Hofweber, 2016b]. The version of internalism defended there includes details that had to be skipped here, in particular regarding the proper formulation of the truth conditions of the inferential reading of quantifiers. These details do matter for the connection to idealism in the end. In particular, on the proper formulation of internalism we get not just structural harmony between our thought and reality, but a stronger form of complete harmony, and with it a stronger form of idealism.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>For the details of this, see [Hofweber, 201X].



Whether internalism is in the end correct is a good question, one much beyond this paper. What mattered here instead is the connection between internalism and idealism, a connection across the allegedly insurmountable language-metaphysics gap. This connection does not support approaching metaphysics in general via the study of language. Many metaphysical issues have nothing to do with how we represent reality. But sometimes a connection obtains. Sometimes thinking about our way of representing the world can lead to substantial metaphysical consequences. When that is so is not at all clear from what we have seen, but even that this connection sometimes obtains might suggest at least a partial result for how to think about metaphysics, one tied to a more question-focused methodology. It suggests that thinking about the representations we employ in asking questions in metaphysics is a possible source for an answer to those questions. And whatever that answer might be, this does not take away from the question. The question does not lose its status as a fully factual and objective question, simply because it was answered by thinking about the representations we employ in asking it. The question does not get deflated, but answered, by thinking about how we ask it, and what function the representations have that we employ in it. In this sense such an approach is not so much neo-Carnapian, but more neo-Kantian. It affirms that thinking about how we represent reality is one, but only one, way to find out what reality is like. And, fittingly, idealism is one result that can be achieved this way.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Acknowledgements: ...

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