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Conceptual Idealism Without Ontological Idealism

Why Idealism Is True After All

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1. Idealism: The Basic Idea

In this essay I hope to outline a somewhat neglected version of idealism and an argument for why it is correct. The outlined version of idealism is in certain ways much more demanding than standard versions of idealism in that it holds that not just minds in general, but our human minds in particular are central to reality. The outlined argument aims to establish this via the somewhat unusual route of considerations about our own language. By thinking about language we can see, I'll argue, that we are central to reality. This should seem somewhat absurd in two ways: First, how could we slightly complicated arrangements of molecules in a vast universe be central for all of reality? Maybe a divine mind or all-pervasive mentality or the like is central for reality, but how could our small human minds be? Second, how could one hope to argue for such a thing with considerations about our own language? How could one hope to establish a metaphysical conclusion like idealism from considerations simply about our own language? Considerations about language only seem to show how we aim to represent reality, but not what reality is like in the end. These are appropriate first reactions, of course, but nonetheless, I hope to make clear that idealism so understood can be defended in just this way. To be sure, I won't be able to give the argument in detail in a short essay like this. I will have to rely on certain claims about language that I have defended in detail elsewhere, cited below. Whether these claims are true should seem to be an open question to almost everyone, and *prima facie* completely unrelated to idealism. In this essay I hope to show at least in outline that the questions about language discussed shortly are closely tied to the metaphysical question about idealism: if things go one way in this debate then a particular version of idealism is correct. And since I have argued elsewhere that things go that way in that debate about language, I thus maintain that idealism is true. I hope to show here why all that is so.

The most natural way to approach idealism is via the relationship of minds and matter. Everyone, leaving a few radicals aside, agrees that there are minds and there is matter or material things, but how they relate to each other is controversial. On the classical materialist picture, minds somehow arise from matter. Once matter combines in special complicated ways minds follow. So understood, minds are a bonus to reality, something that didn't have to be there, but fortunately came about since matter combined in just the right ways. One standard alternative to standard materialism is dualism: minds don't just arise from matter alone but require a further, distinctly mental ingredient. Another standard alternative is what I'll call *classical idealism*: minds didn't arise from matter, but the other way round, matter arose, somehow, from minds. These options about the relationship between minds and matter are widely discussed, but for the debate about idealism they are wrongheaded. Idealism should not simply be seen as classical idealism. The relationship between minds and matter is a good question, and classical idealism is an idealist answer to it, but the issue is broader than that. The real issue about idealism is not simply about matter and how it relates to minds, but about the place of minds in reality. Idealism is better seen as a label for the vision that minds are central in reality. In particular, on the idealist vision, minds are metaphysically central for reality. Minds are clearly central for all kinds of things— aesthetics, ethics, etc.—but idealism has the vision that minds are central for reality from a broad metaphysical point of view. Giving rise to matter is one way this could be, but there are many other options as well. I will thus understand *idealism* as the view that minds are metaphysically central to reality. How they are metaphysically central could be realized in a number of different ways: via the mind's connection to matter, via some sense of metaphysical priority of the mental over the non-mental, and in other ways. In particular, idealism as such should not have to be committed to metaphysics that relies on a notion of metaphysical priority. Minds might be central without being metaphysically more basic than the non-mental, but in other ways.¹

Idealism in the general sense might seem bad enough, but I will here focus on a stronger version than this general form of idealism. For idealism to be true in the general sense, any minds could be central to reality. If there is a god who created the material world then minds, or at least one of them, are central. If panpsychism is true, and all matter has mental features beside other non-mental ones, then this too would vindicate the general idealist vision of the centrality of minds, or at least the mental, in reality. I won't discuss these general versions of idealism here, but instead focus on the much more ambitious, narrower version that *our* minds are central to reality. Idealism in this narrower and stronger sense is focused on human beings and their minds, and holds that those minds are central to reality. Let us call *strong idealism*

¹ I thus take the notion of idealism at first to be slightly broader than how it is characterized in the introduction to this volume, where it is tied to one of two kinds of priority. This is, of course, not a substantial disagreement, but still notable, since idealism is first and foremost a certain kind of vision about the metaphysical place of minds in reality, and it seems to me that this vision could be realized with or without a claim of priority. See Hofweber (forthcoming) for more on this.

the thesis that our human minds are metaphysically central to reality. Strong idealism is an anthropocentric form of idealism. Not just minds in general, but our human minds in particular have a metaphysically central place in reality. This should seem even more absurd than idealism. How could it be that the overall metaphysics of reality has a special place for us in it, us human beings? Whether this is true and how one might argue for it is the topic of this essay.

Idealism so understood flies in the face of what we know about our position in the universe: we are just slightly complicated creatures on an average planet in one galaxy among billions. To hold, in light of this, that we are central for all of reality seems to reflect a certain illusion of grandeur. We might be special in many ways, but when the overall metaphysical story of reality is told, it doesn't seem likely we will have a big part in it. Nonetheless there are a number of ways to try to stake out our central place in reality, some better known, some less so. One could try to argue that matter is derivative on our minds after all, for example via some kind of phenomenal reduction: matter is constructed out of phenomena, somehow.² Or one could hold that although matter itself is not mental, which chunks of matter are an object, and which are merely scattered matter, is tied to us, somehow.³ But both of them face the problem of making clear how this dependence on what there is on us is compatible with what we know to be true. For example, we know that there were dinosaurs before there were humans. But how that can be compatible with this form of idealism is problematic. There were no humans when there were dinosaurs, so they were not around to construct them from phenomena, nor to unify scattered matter into an object. It is no help to maintain that humans would have done so if they had been around, since this at most shows that there would have been dinosaurs under those circumstances, not that there in fact were dinosaurs then. And it is also no help to maintain that all anyone means by 'there were dinosaurs' is that 'there would have been dinosaurs had we been around,' since this is obviously not what it in fact means, and anyone who would like to claim it in fact is the proper meaning of this sentence in English had better be able to back this up with a straight face when talking to people who study natural language for a living. It also does not help, by itself at least, to hold that time also depends on us, somehow, just like the material objects. Even if the temporal order of events somehow depends on us, it isn't clear how that gets us dinosaurs before humans, since no one ever experienced dinosaurs and no one's range of the temporal ordering goes far enough back to put dinosaurs in it. Other options are, of course, possible and the above options could, of course, be defended further, but at a first stab none of these moves is very promising. In light of all this idealism looks like a really bad idea.⁴

² See Foster (2008) for a pro, and Sellars (2007) for a con.

³ For some proposals along those lines, see Putnam (1981), Einheuser (2006), and Pearce (this volume).

⁴ For a more sophisticated version of phenomenalism, see Pelczar (2015). There are also further and less well-known options. One is to argue that although matter is in no way mental, minds nonetheless have to exist in any world in which matter exists, i.e., a mindless material world is impossible. An argument for this conclusion was given by Anton Friedrich Koch, for example in Koch (1990) and (2010). See Hofweber (2015) for a critical discussion, which also discusses whether there might be a coherent fragmentalist

Any form of idealism worth taking seriously has to meet at least some minimal constraints. Although all of them can be argued over, I accept the following, fairly strict and hard to satisfy constraints for any defense of idealism, including the one here, of course. First, it must be made clear how this form of idealism is compatible with what we have good reason to take ourselves to know: that there were dinosaurs before there were humans, that there were material things before there were any minds, etc. This I will call *the compatibility constraint*. Idealism must be compatible with what we otherwise know. It is no help to insist that idealism is a revisionary metaphysics that maintains that reality started a few thousand years ago, with human minds, or a few years ago, with my mind. Second, one must be able to state idealism explicitly, not merely to gesture at a general vision. For example, it is no use to hold that reality depends on us, and that nothing more can be said in what sense this dependence holds. Idealism must be stated explicitly, in terms accessible to all. I will call this *the explicitness constraint*.⁵ Besides these, there is the obvious further *argument constraint*: idealism must be supported by some argument, it should not just be a general idea or hypothesis or hunch. The problem thus is to find a coherent version of idealism that meets all three constraints. Such a version of idealism would make clear that and in what sense our minds are central to reality, state this explicitly, outline how it is compatible with what we know to be true, and support it all with some argument. In the following I would like to outline how this can go.

2. What There Is vs. What Is the Case

Idealism, in the sense under discussion here, holds that our minds are central to reality. The concept of reality can in general be understood, or precisified, in two ways: the totality of what there is, or the totality of what is the case. It would be petty to insist that only one of those deserves the term ‘reality,’ while the other should be called something else. Both are naturally seen as two ways to spell out what we mean by ‘reality.’ Correspondingly, there are two ways to hold that minds are central for reality: for reality as what there is, or for reality as what is the case. Idealism can thus be seen as falling into two kinds: one which holds that minds are central for reality as the totality of things, and another which holds that they are central for reality as the totality of facts. The totality of things, or what there is, is generally seen as the concern of ontology.⁶ What is the case concerns facts or truths. Correspondingly, we can call the

version of idealism, in the sense of Fine (2005). Another recent option is Smithson (manuscript). I will focus on a different positive proposal here, but many other options for being an idealist are discussed in detail in Hofweber (forthcoming).

⁵ The compatibility constraint is in essence the same as to hold that idealism must be modest metaphysics, and the explicitness constraint is in essence that it must not be esoteric metaphysics. See Hofweber (2009) and in particular Hofweber (2016: chs. 1 and 13) for more on this.

⁶ Some disagree, maintaining that ‘ontology’ should be reserved for the fundamental things, or the things that ultimately exist, or the like. This debate is irrelevant for our purposes here, since we merely look for a label to distinguish two kinds of idealism, not to take a stance in a meta-ontological dispute.

form of idealism that concerns the place of our minds in reality understood as what there is *ontological idealism*, and idealism that concerns the place of our minds in reality understood as what is the case *alethic idealism*. This might be an in principle useful distinction, but it is not clear how it could possibly help in defending idealism. All the worries we have seen about idealism above seem to apply to both versions. How could that particular dinosaur, part of reality as what there is, depend on us, since we weren't even around when it was around? And how could the fact that this dinosaur exists depend on us, since we are equally not around for it to obtain when it obtained?

These two forms of idealism are different, but they are, of course, not independent. There are general connections between what there is and what is the case. First, for any object *o* which exists the fact that *o* exists obtains, and the other way round. Second, although the versions of idealism briefly discussed above, including classical idealism, are naturally seen as versions of ontological idealism, they can also naturally be seen as implying a version of alethic idealism. If what there is somehow depends on us, then it might well do so in a way that what it is like also depends on us. Maybe the ontology of the world is constructed in such a way by our minds that what these constructs are like is similarly tied to our minds. Taking these together we get that not only does what there is depend on us, what is the case also depends on us, somehow at least. But ontological idealism is highly problematic, and if alethic idealism is to be supported via ontological idealism then it too is highly problematic. So far we get nowhere.

But focusing on alethic idealism directly allows for a different position to come into view. We can wonder about whether there is a certain harmony between our minds and reality, a harmony that suggests that they are a perfect match for each other. And one way to consider such a harmony is via the relationship of the facts that can obtain as part of reality and the facts that we can represent conceptually. Maybe which facts obtain and which facts we can represent are rather different things, and there thus is no harmony between our minds and the world. But maybe which facts can obtain and which facts we can represent are just the same, and thus our minds and the world are a perfect match. And maybe they are a perfect match for a reason, and not just by accident. It could be that there is a version of alethic idealism in this neighborhood, to be articulated more clearly, one that might meet our constraints. In other words, we should see whether there is a version of idealism tied to there being no ineffable facts: facts we cannot represent conceptually.⁷ And we should see whether such a version might meet our constraints above. The vision of this version of idealism is that there is a connection between our minds and reality as the totality of what is the case, since there is a connection between which facts can in principle obtain and which facts we can in principle represent. This version of idealism, broadly understood, is thus tied to ineffable facts being ruled out in principle. Reality cannot outrun our minds in a way

⁷ Thomas Nagel (1986) characterizes idealism this way, and then quickly rejects it. I agree with Nagel that this is a good characterization of idealism, but not with his rejection of it, as will become clear later.

that might lead to ineffable facts. To see if there is hope for a version of idealism in this neighborhood we should thus look a little bit at ineffable facts and whether there are any.

3. Ineffable Facts

An ineffable fact is one that we cannot in principle represent in thought or language, that is to say, represent conceptually. To represent a fact, in our sense here, it is not enough to represent something about a fact, for example in the sense that my favorite fact is surprising. Rather one must have a conceptual representation that captures the fact, in the sense that the representation ‘Grass is green’ captures the fact that grass is green.

The question is not whether human beings can in fact represent all facts. This is quite clearly and uncontroversially false. Rather the question is whether human beings can do this in principle: whether the human mind and human languages are in principle up to the task of representing any fact. To illustrate the difference, consider the fact of what everybody’s phone number is. It is just a big conjunction of facts, each of which is easily represented. But no single human being can represent the whole conjunction of phone number facts. This does not motivate a lack of harmony between our minds and the world. To the contrary, this is an example where our minds are in principle perfectly suited to represent the fact, if it wasn’t for our limited lifespan and memory. Thus this example only shows that we don’t live long enough to always be able to represent the conjunctions of facts we can represent. What matters for us instead is whether there are any facts that are beyond us in a stronger sense, one that might motivate that what reality is like and what we can represent are quite likely completely different things. The real question is whether some aspects of reality are so different from what our minds can represent that they are unsuitable to do so even in principle, leaving aside limitations of lifespan and memory. Ineffable facts, on the sense of this notion relevant for us here, are facts that are alien to our minds and languages not just because of size, but in a deeper way.⁸ Are there some facts such that our minds are in principle unsuitable to represent them? Either there are or there aren’t such facts, and thus either the *effability thesis*—everything is effable—or the *ineffability thesis*—something is ineffable—should be correct. Which one should we accept?

There are several powerful arguments for there being ineffable facts. I will only briefly discuss two here: the argument from analogy and the argument from a missing explanation.⁹ The argument from analogy simply states that although we can’t give examples of facts ineffable for us, we can give examples of facts ineffable for simpler creatures like a squirrel. The squirrel can’t represent in principle that there is an economic crisis in Greece, its mind is just too simple to do that. But why think that

⁸ For a more precise characterization of ineffable facts, see Hofweber (2017).

⁹ For a discussion of several further arguments, see Hofweber (2006) and (2017).

other creatures, gods or aliens, couldn't look down at us similarly as we look down at the squirrel. These creatures could give examples of facts that we can't represent, and so we too should think that there are facts ineffable for us.¹⁰

The second argument is that if we can in principle represent all the facts that obtain then two very different things would exactly coincide: what we can represent and what is the case. But what would explain this coincidence? One option is a broadly idealist interpretation: our minds are involved in what is the case. Maybe what there is is our product and it is produced in such a way that what it is like and thus what is the case can all be represented by us. Then it would be no wonder that we can represent everything and that our minds and the world are in complete harmony. But we have reason to think that ontological idealism is false and that what there is is not our product. An explanation via ontological idealism is in principle possible, but it won't be the right explanation. Without a better explanation we should thus expect that these two different things do not exactly coincide, and thus that there are ineffable facts. They could, of course, coincide and we got lucky that the world is simple enough that our minds can in principle represent it all. But that would be a lucky accident, and thus we shouldn't expect it to obtain. We might have gotten lucky, but we should expect that we didn't.

If we accept that there are ineffable facts we can wonder what they are like. And here it is easiest to think about which parts of our representational repertoire lets us down in not being able to represent these facts at least in principle. Since we paradigmatically represent facts with a subject-predicate representation, we naturally can name three suspects. A subject-predicate representation in its simplest form represents an object having a property. We might thus fall short by either not being able to represent certain objects, or by being unable to express a certain property, or by needing a completely different form or structure of a representation to represent a particular fact. It could be missing objects, missing properties, or missing structure.

On the relevant notion of ineffability, the one closest tied to the grander question about a harmony between mind and world, any fact that is ineffable is in principle ineffable: our mind just isn't the kind of mind that can represent it. In particular, any fact ineffable in this sense should pass the *incommunicability test*: a different kind of creature that can represent this fact could not help us to represent it, no matter how hard they tried. An alien or a god who can represent all the facts could not communicate a fact to us that is ineffable for us. All they could tell us is that we are just not the kinds of creatures that can represent this fact. With this test in mind we can see that the source of our ineffability can't be missing objects. Since we in general can piggyback on the referential success of others, we could exploit the aliens' or gods' use of a name for a particular object to refer to the same object via them. Maybe we can't refer to a particular object *o* without the help of other creatures, but if those creatures can refer to them then they could help us. They could tell us their name for *o* and we could use it with the intention to refer to whatever they are referring to. And for any object it seems that

¹⁰ See Nagel (1986: 95ff.) for this argument.

there could be some creature or other who can refer to it, and thus help us out. Objects therefore can't be an in principle source of a limitation. We can thus say that the relevant notion of ineffable facts, for our discussion here, is an *object-permitting* notion of the ineffable. In essence, reference to objects can be taken to be free and assumed to be possible. The issue is a bit more tricky with properties, and in fact the question of ineffable properties is quite similar to that of ineffable facts, so I will leave this question aside for just a moment.¹¹ Finally, it is quite clear that missing structure is a proper source of ineffability that passes the incommunicability test. If representing a particular fact requires a kind of a representation that a mind like ours just doesn't have access to then the aliens or gods couldn't help us with it. They would simply have to admit that a mind like ours isn't suitable to represent that fact, no matter what help it might get. This structural ineffability, where the source of ineffability is the structure of a representation that is required to represent the fact, is what we should expect to obtain in our own case.¹²

Such structural ineffability is a paradigm anti-idealist conclusion. Our minds are such that they can represent some of the facts, but other facts are completely alien to our conceptual thought. Our minds and reality are not in harmony overall, they only harmonize for a part of reality, the part we can represent, but not for reality in general. And structural ineffability would mean a deep disharmony obtains. We don't even have the kinds of representations available to represent certain facts.¹³ Idealism motivated along the lines of a harmony of our minds and reality thus seems to go nowhere. We have reason to think that our minds and reality are sometimes at odds with each other, undermining a certain way to realize the idealist vision.

However, there is also another way to think about all this which incorporates a different conception of facts and how we talk about them. This way is closely tied to questions in the philosophy of language, and if that way turns out to be correct then the prospect for idealism will look very different.

4. Talk about Facts and Propositions

In this section I hope to outline two contrasting pictures of how we talk about facts and propositions. Which one is correct is a question about what we do when we talk a certain way, and thus in the end a broadly empirical question about language. It should be taken to be a largely open question which one is correct, and there is some discussion in various parts of the philosophy of language for or against some part or other of the

¹¹ See Hofweber (2006), where this topic is discussed in detail.

¹² For an interesting argument that structural ineffability is impossible, see Filcheva (2017).

¹³ Structural disharmony is a stronger disharmony than mere content disharmony. On the latter we have the right kinds of representations available, but we can't fill them in properly. This would be the case, for example, when a fact can be represented with a subject-predicate representation, but we can't represent the particular property required. For more on these notions of harmony and their connection to idealism, see Hofweber (manuscript) and Hofweber (forthcoming).

two pictures. However, I will argue below that these considerations about language are crucial for settling the question about idealism, in a way I hope to make clear below. Let me first make explicit what the two pictures are.

When we talk about facts or propositions, do we talk about them in a way similar to how we talk about objects? Do that-clauses and proposition or fact terms—expressions like ‘the fact/the proposition that *p*’—aim to refer to or denote some entities which are facts or proposition? Are that-clauses referring expressions, like names, or do they have a quite different semantic function? Here reasonable people can and do disagree.¹⁴ For example, it *prima facie* speaks against reference that it doesn’t always seem to be possible to substitute one proposition term for another without affecting the truth conditions of the resulting sentence. This difference is illustrated with pairs like fearing that one’s mother will reject one vs. fearing the proposition that one’s mother will reject one. One is fear related to one’s mother, the other proposition phobia, fear of a particular proposition itself, which are different. On the other hand, it speaks *prima facie* in favor of reference that that-clauses interact with quantifiers just as referential expressions do. If you fear that *p* then you fear something. So, it looks like that there needs to be a thing that you fear, i.e. the proposition that *p*.

But what should those say about quantification that hold that that-clauses are not referring expressions? Here they have several options, but the best seems to me to be the one that can be motivated by looking at the function of quantification in natural language in general. To put it briefly, quantifiers in natural language are polysemous, with a reading that ranges over a domain of things, and another reading that plays a certain inferential role. I’ll call those the domain conditions reading and the inferential reading. On the domain conditions reading of ‘something is *F*’ a speaker is making a claim about the domain of objects or entities, and says that at least one of them is *F*. On the inferential reading of ‘something is *F*’ the speaker makes an assertion that inferentially relates to other sentences or assertions in their language. On this reading, any instance ‘*F*(*t*)’ implies ‘something is *F*’. I have argued in other work¹⁵ that we have a need for both uses of quantifiers in ordinary communication and that polysemous quantifiers with their two readings fulfill this need. If this were correct or close to correct then the inference from ‘I fear that *p*’ to ‘I fear something’ would be valid on the inferential reading of the quantifier whether that-clauses refer or not. The truth conditions of a quantified sentence in its inferential reading would thus have to be different than the truth conditions in the domain conditions reading: on the domain conditions reading the inference is only valid when the relevant instance picks out an object in the domain, on the inferential reading it is valid whether or not the instance does this. What then are the truth conditions on the inferential reading? There are several options that would give it the inferential role for which we want it for, but there is a

¹⁴ See, for example, Bach (1997), Moltmann (2003), and Schiffer (1987) who argue against an aim of reference, and Schiffer (2003), King (2002), and many others who argue in favor of an aim of reference or denotation. Some hold mixed views, for example Rosefeldt (2008).

¹⁵ See Hofweber (2000) and especially Hofweber (2016: ch. 3).

simplest and in a sense optimal solution to this problem: the quantified sentence ‘something is F’ has to be truth-conditionally equivalent to the disjunction of all the instances ‘F(t)’ in one’s own language. This disjunction has the inferential role we want from the quantifier, and any other truth conditions that give it that inferential role have to be logically weaker. And similarly, universally quantified sentences are equivalent to the conjunction over all the instances.¹⁶ This is the optional solution to the problem what truth conditions give the quantified sentence the inferential role for which we want it.

In fact, this is not quite right, since I simplified in a way that will be significant later. We do get the inferential role from simply a disjunction over the instances, but only when we ignore context sensitivity in the instances. This simplification is not always legitimate. For example, the inference from ‘I think it will float’ to ‘I think something’ should be valid, but it isn’t clear how this can work if we simply generalize over the instances in the truth conditions of the quantified statement. How is the ‘it’ getting its value in such a big disjunction? In principle, an utterance of ‘it’ might stand for any object whatsoever. But all this can be accommodated in slightly more complex truth conditions. Instead of simply forming the disjunction over all the context-insensitive instances we allow demonstratives and other context-dependent referring expressions in the instances, and then bind them, or assign them values, with domain conditions quantifiers. So, instead of assigning ‘something is F’ on the inferential reading of the truth conditions $\forall F(t)$, we assign it the truth conditions $\exists \bar{x} \forall F(t[\bar{x}])$. Here \bar{x} is short for a countable set of new variables $x_1, x_2, \dots, t[\bar{x}]$ is a term or instance that can include some of these variables, and $\exists \bar{x}$ binds all these variables with a domain conditions reading quantifier. In essence, these variables correspond to demonstratives and other context-dependent referential expressions, and the quantifier that binds them gives them their values, where any object is taken to be a potential referent of the demonstrative. This gives the quantifier on its inferential reading the proper truth conditions even allowing for context-sensitive expressions.¹⁷

Once more, reasonable people may disagree whether this is the correct view of quantification in natural language, and I won’t be able to argue for the side I accept now, only that either side should be an option that is on the table. This issue is a largely empirical one about our own language and our own speech. But this topic, I hope to show now, is central for the question of idealism. But before we get there, let’s put some names on the options. We have seen that there are two large-scale views about talk about propositions and facts. *Internalism* holds that that-clauses and proposition terms in general are non-referential, and that quantifiers over propositions and facts are used in their inferential reading. On the other hand, *externalism* is the view that that-clauses are referential, and quantifiers are used in their domain conditions

¹⁶ Although we only need to consider these simple quantifiers here, the basic idea can be extended to iterated quantifiers and to a larger class of quantifiers called generalized quantifiers. The details are in the appendix to Hofweber (2016: ch. 3).

¹⁷ For more on the details of this, see Hofweber (2006) and Hofweber (2016: ch. 9).

reading. These are two large-scale views about a certain part of our language. We can now see that our larger issue about idealism depends on whether internalism or externalism is correct.

5. Back to Ineffable Facts

Our main question about the harmony between mind and world was one about whether there are, or at least could be, ineffable facts. Does reality, understood as the totality of facts, have to match up with our minds such that ineffable facts are ruled out? Or should we expect there to be ineffable facts, in particular structurally ineffable facts, and thus that reality and our minds are out of harmony? This is a substantial metaphysical question about the relationship between our minds and reality. But it turns out that our issues from above about what we do when we talk about facts are crucial for settling this question. In particular, I will now argue that if internalism is true then ineffable facts are ruled out.

Suppose then that internalism about our talk about facts and propositions is correct. Whether this is indeed so is a substantial question about our language, which obviously we can't expect to settle here. We will instead focus on the connection of internalism to idealism. If internalism is true then that-clauses are non-referential, and quantifiers are used in their inferential reading. This guarantees immediately that the effability thesis is true, and thus that there are no ineffable facts. The effability thesis said that everything is effable, i.e. every fact or proposition is effable. It thus quantifies over propositions, and by internalism, this uses quantification in its inferential reading. With the truth conditions of the inferential reading of the quantifier the effability thesis is equivalent to the conjunction over all the instances. And those instances are the instances in our own language. Thus the effability thesis is the conjunction over all instances 'that p is effable.'¹⁸ And this is true for each instance, since each instance is an instance in our own language. Thus every fact is effable in our present language. This must seem highly suspicious, and we will shortly look at what we should think of this argument. Before that, however, we should note that this simple argument for the truth of the effability thesis given internalism used the simple version of the truth conditions of inferential quantifiers. However, the same works with the proper version. On the proper version the effability thesis is equivalent to $\forall \bar{x} \wedge (\text{that } p[\bar{x}] \text{ is effable})$. This is also true, using the object-permitting notion of effability, which is, as we saw above, the proper notion to use for our purposes. Since missing objects are not a proper source of ineffability, the proper version of the truth conditions of internal quantifiers introduces

¹⁸ More precisely: 'if it is a fact that p then that p is effable.' Adding the conditional doesn't affect the main point, so I'll keep it simple. The above is stronger in that every proposition is effable, not just every true proposition, which corresponds to every fact. But we could of course use the conditional instead, here and below.

no real further obstacles to the effability thesis. On either the simple or the proper version of the truth conditions of internal quantifiers, the effability thesis is true.

For an argument about the mind–world relationship, this seems to involve distinctly too much language and mind, and not enough world. The argument hopes to establish that reality as the totality of facts contains no ineffable facts, but reality didn't really come up at all. All I relied on in the argument was something about language; reality played no role. How that could be a legitimate way to reach this conclusion must seem dubious, to say the least. Before we can properly address this worry, however, let's see how an internalist should reply to our arguments for ineffable facts: the argument from analogy and the argument from explanation.

The internalist will hold that there is an explanation why every fact is effable, and thus why the effability thesis is true. It is no accident that every fact is effable, since 'every fact' is a quantifier that generalizes over the instances in our language. Thus no wonder it is true that every fact is effable. All of our own instances are effable by us. This explanation is perfectly good, assuming internalism, of course. It makes clear that and explains why every fact is effable, although, of course, it again leaves out reality and focuses just on our own language. Still, the internalist will maintain that although this might be an unexpected explanation, it is the correct one nonetheless.

The argument from analogy similarly has a clear reply coming from the internalist. Even though some creatures might be able to represent fewer facts than we can, no creature can represent more. Since we can represent every fact, and since there are no more facts than every fact, there can be no creature that can represent more. The aliens or gods might be better than us in many ways, but, assuming internalism, they cannot best us when it comes to being able to represent facts in principle. We can already do as well as can in principle be done, and so no more is possible.

This is what the internalist will say in reply, but what to make of it all is thereby not clear. There are two basic reactions to this situation. A first reaction is to hold that even if internalism is true, nothing of great substance follows. Instead it shows that we need to state the questions we really should be asking differently than how we did ask them so far. When we try to find out about the larger metaphysical issues about the relationship between mind and world we can't just ask about every fact or every proposition. That will lead nowhere, if internalism is true. Instead we need to ask a different question, a question that involves a domain where internalism is not true and where we have hope of leading to a more overtly metaphysical issue, at least in the sense that this issue won't be settled by only looking at language, but instead by also looking at reality. This first reaction is *prima facie* very plausible, but in the end it is mistaken. To see this, let us briefly consider how we might ask the question instead. Instead of asking about whether we can represent every fact or every truth, we could, for example, ask whether we can represent what is represented by every true sentence in any language. A sentence, we can assume, is just a concrete physical inscription and thus internalism does not apply to it, we can also assume. There can be many sentences in all kinds of languages, and since internalism does not apply to talk about sentences the question

whether we can say everything that these sentences say is a real question, substantially different than the one whether we can represent all the facts, or so it seems. But this apparent difference is illusory. Although what sentences there are is not in any way tied to issues about internalism, what content these sentences can have, and what truths or facts they express, is not independent of internalism. If internalism about talk about facts and propositions is indeed true for our own language then from this we can conclude that every sentence that represents a fact, or a truth, or expresses a proposition, or has content, expresses a proposition we can express as well. Internalism about talk about propositions affects all other proposition-like aspects of discourse. Any sentence whatsoever that has a content, i.e. expresses a proposition, will express a proposition that we can express as well, since we can express all propositions. Any other sentence has no content.¹⁹ But a sentence with no content says nothing and expresses no truth or even falsehood. We can do the same with meaningless scribbles. Other attempts to state the question differently will similarly lead nowhere new. In the end, every road comes back to truths, facts, and propositions, and when it comes to expressing those we are all there is to be.

This suggests a second reaction to our situation that we were able to conclude that we can represent every fact by simply looking at our language. That reaction involves an acceptance of the result, and a particular explanation of why we were able to draw this conclusion this particular way. That reaction involves a particular metaphysical view about what the propositional or fact-like aspect of reality is like. And it involves a particular view about the relationship of reality as the totality of things to reality as the totality of facts. This more positive metaphysical reaction is the right one, I maintain, and it is a form of idealism.

6. Alethic Idealism as Conceptual Idealism

It is highly suspicious to draw any conclusions about reality from simply considerations about language. After all, language concerns how we aim to represent reality, and that can be different from how reality is. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw substantial metaphysical conclusions from certain kinds of considerations about language. One example, which I will argue for momentarily, that illustrates this is this: if internalism is true for talk about facts then facts do not exist. Before arguing for this we can note that the assumption of this argument is simply a claim about language, i.e. internalism about talk about facts. But the conclusion is a metaphysical one, i.e. facts do not exist. Here is why this consequence nonetheless follows from the assumption. If internalism is true then that-clauses and fact terms more generally are non-referential. But there are two ways in which these terms might be non-referential. First, they are not just non-referential in the sense that they have the semantic function of referring, but they fail to carry it out, since there are no facts to refer to. That wouldn't simply be a claim

¹⁹ For a similar conclusion via a different route, see Davidson (1984).

about language, but a claim about both language and the world. Instead, second, they are non-referential in the sense that they do not have the semantic function of reference at all. They are not even in the business of referring. If they are non-referential in the first sense then this can't be figured out by looking at language alone, you need to know that they fail in their referential ambitions, and thus that there are no facts. But that they are not referential in the second sense can be found out by considerations about language alone. All that is required for this is to find out that their semantic function is not in the business of referring, which is a fact about language alone. If that-clauses and fact terms are non-referential in this sense then it nonetheless follows that there are no facts, i.e. facts do not exist.²⁰ Take the domain of all the things that exist, everything there is. None of it is the fact that snow is white. Since 'the fact that snow is white' is, by assumption, non-referential it does not refer to any of the things in the domain of things. And since it doesn't refer to any of them, none of them is the fact that snow is white. Since that domain contains everything that exists, nothing which exists is the fact that snow is white. Thus no such fact exists, and similarly for all other facts.²¹

This argument is in essence no different than the argument that there is no such thing as the Nothing, where *the Nothing* is, by stipulation, understood as whatever our term 'nothing' refers to. Since the latter is a quantifier and not a referential expression it does not refer to anything and thus there is no such thing as the Nothing. This metaphysical conclusion about what does not exist can be established solely on the basis of semantic considerations, not even involving a further premise about the truth of certain sentences. If 'nothing' is not referential then the non-existence of the Nothing follows from that alone.

Internalism thus guarantees that the ontology of the world does not include propositions or facts. This in particular means that reality, understood as all there is, does not include reality understood as all that is the case. The facts are not just part of the things. And this opens up a special kind of possibility: the possibility that what there is is independent of us, but what is the case is not. And with it, it opens up a possibility for a particular idealist position. Above I called 'ontological idealism' the view that we are central for reality understood as what there is, and 'alethic idealism' the view that we are central for reality understood as what is the case. It wasn't clear above how one might be an idealist about one, but not the other, since there are clear connections between the two. But by now a new possibility should come into view. Reality as all there is might be independent of us, but there is at least one sense in which reality as all that is the case does depend on us, and thus that we are central for it. Internalism about talk

²⁰ If internalism is correct then all sentences with quantifiers over facts have two readings, including 'there are no facts.' What is at issue here is only whether this is true on the domain conditions reading. It is trivially false on the inferential reading, since 'It's a fact that snow is white' implies 'there are facts' on the inferential reading.

²¹ I am assuming here that facts are just the kind of things like the fact that snow is white. In particular, facts are not understood via some theoretical role, or as theoretical entities in some theory.

about facts and propositions together with externalism about talk about things points at how all that could be so, and in more detail it can go like the following.

Let us distinguish the *truth-dependence* of what is the case from its *range-dependence*. The facts are truth-dependent on us just in case which facts obtain depends on us, somehow. That is to say, the particular facts obtaining is somehow due to us or depends on us, at least in the sense that if we did something different then a large range of facts would or would not obtain. In this sense of dependence the facts quite clearly do not depend on us. What is the case does not in general depend on us, with obvious exceptions like the fact that the Greek economy is in crisis. In general the facts that obtain would obtain no matter what we did or will do, again with obvious exceptions. To the contrary, we can say that the facts *range-depend* on us just in case the range of what facts can in principle obtain is tied to us, in particular to what facts we can in principle represent. The range of the fact-like aspect of reality is tied to us: what facts can in principle obtain is tied to what facts we can in principle represent. Let us call *conceptual idealism* the view that reality as the totality of facts is range-dependent on us. Conceptual idealism is a form of alethic idealism, it concerns our place in reality understood as the totality of facts. And it is a form of strong idealism, maintaining the centrality of our minds, not just minds in general. We are central for reality as the totality of facts, since the range of the facts that can in principle obtain is tied to us and what we can in principle represent. This connection does not obtain by mere accident, but for a reason, and the internalist has an account of why this connection obtains. It is not the account one might have expected, but it is a perfectly valid account of this connection nonetheless, assuming internalism is indeed correct.

Internalism about talk about propositions and facts supports conceptual idealism. It shows that and why there is a harmony between our minds and reality. It doesn't show this by explaining how two different things, our minds and the independent fact-like aspect of reality, match up. Instead, it shows that those two things are not two completely different things in the first place. Even though the facts that obtain don't depend on us for their obtaining, and they would still obtain even if we were different; nonetheless, the range of facts that can in principle obtain is not independent of us. The range of facts has to match the range of our representations. This is an important fact to note about our connection to reality understood as the totality of facts. We thus have a central place in the larger metaphysical story about reality. It is maybe not the central place other idealists have envisioned, but it is a substantial metaphysical place nonetheless.

7. Conclusion

Our main question was whether it could be that our minds are central for reality. If so then idealism would be true, at least on one way of understanding it. Any version of idealism worth taking seriously has to meet the compatibility, the explicitness, and the argument constraint. I have argued that once we distinguish ontological from alethic idealism, as well as internalism and externalism about talk about facts, we can see

that there is a coherent version of idealism. It is a version of alethic idealism that is compatible with ontological realism. Reality as the totality of things might well be independent of us, it is simply there waiting for us to talk about it. But reality as the totality of facts is not independent of us. It is range-dependent on our conceptual capacities in that what facts can in principle obtain is connected to what facts we can in principle represent. Reality as all that is the case has a central place in it for us. The larger metaphysical story of reality so understood gives us a special part. And this version of idealism meets all three of our constraints. It is explicitly stated, since the range-dependence of the propositional aspect of reality can be explicitly stated. It is compatible with what we generally take ourselves to know, since the dependence of the fact-like aspect of reality is not counterfactual dependence, but only range-dependence. Range-dependence does not imply counterfactual dependence. Even if there aren't and can't be facts that we can't in principle represent, this does not mean that the facts that do obtain depend on us for their obtaining. And it doesn't mean that if we would have been different, with different concepts, then the facts would have been different. The range of the facts that can obtain is tied to us in a way that settles what can in principle obtain. If we were different then we might be able to represent fewer facts, but that doesn't mean that there would have been fewer facts. And no matter how we might have been, we can't represent more facts than we in fact are already able to represent in principle. Here different humans are no different than the aliens or gods discussed earlier. Range-dependence is a kind of dependence, but not the kind of dependence commonly employed in debates about the mind dependence of reality.

Finally, the present view meets the argument constraint as well. Although I have not given the arguments for it in any detail, it is clear how one has to argue for it: defend internalism about talk about propositions. This is simply a task about language, and a largely empirical one at that. It concerns the question what we in fact do when we talk about propositions or facts. The kinds of arguments that can settle this issue are in essence no different than the kinds of arguments that settle the question whether 'nothing' aims to refer to some entity, or whether it does something else semantically. How one can argue for internalism in principle is no miracle, and if the strategy outlined in this essay is correct then idealism follows. Compatibility, explicitness, and argument are all constraints that can be met, at least in outline. We can argue for internalism by considerations about language, and internalism leads to conceptual idealism, a form of alethic idealism. In other work, cited right below, I have argued for internalism about talk about facts and propositions. Conceptual idealism is thus true, I maintain, even though ontological idealism is false. Talk about things is quite different than talk about facts. I hold that externalism is true for talk about things, while internalism is true for talk about facts. If so then conceptual idealism is true, even if ontological idealism is false, as I believe it is.

The present essay mostly outlined this version of idealism and the argument for why it is true. I have argued elsewhere in much more detail, quite independently from our present discussion and purely on grounds tied to considerations about language, that

internalism is true for talk about facts and propositions, while externalism is true for talk about things. Internalism and externalism in general, and our cases of propositions, facts, and things in particular, are discussed in all their glory in Hofweber (2016). Ineffable facts are discussed in much more detail in Hofweber (2017), and conceptual idealism as well as its relationship to other forms of idealism is the subject of Hofweber (forthcoming). The more substantial claims about language as well as the details about conceptual idealism are beyond the scope of this short essay, but I hope that even without the details it has become plausible that there is a coherent version of idealism connected to these issues, one that might well be true.

It is, of course, not lost on me that some of this might seem like a cheap trick or that the kind of considerations I used couldn't possibly show that idealism is true. It might seem that either I watered down what idealism is, or I have just tried to establish it with some kind of self-referential trick, connecting the statement of what idealism is with some semantics that seems to guarantee the truth of that statement. Although I honestly do feel this worry just as much as the next person, I have come to believe that this is not at all a semantic trick. Instead, internalism incorporates a substantial metaphysical view about the nature of the fact-like aspect of reality. Our talk of facts, truths, and other proposition-like things forms a unit that is intimately tied to many things, including our conception of reality. Internalism and externalism are connected to two very different pictures of what this whole aspect of our talking about the world as well as the world itself is like. If internalism is true then there is no independent domain of such things: facts and propositions are not things at all. Nonetheless, facts obtain and some propositions are true. The ontology of the world is one thing, it is simply there. But the propositional aspect of reality is something quite different. Reality concerns both, with one sense concerning the ontology, and another concerning the facts. We are central for one, but not the other, and thus, overall, we are central to reality. Despite our being just slightly complicated creatures on a small planet, the overall metaphysical story of reality has a special place in it for us.²²

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²² My thanks to the UConn philosophy department for helpful discussions, to my local idealism support group—Bob Adams, Krasimira Filcheva, Bill Lycan, Rob Smithson, Craig Warmke—for support, and to Kenny Pearce, Nick Stang, and two anonymous referees for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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