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Are There Ineffable Aspects of Reality?

Thomas Hofweber

1. INTRODUCTION

Should we think that some aspects of reality are simply beyond creatures like us, in the sense that we are in principle incapable of representing them in thought or language? Or should we think that beings with a mind and language like ours are able to represent every truth and every fact? In other words, should we think that some truths are ineffable for us: beyond what we can think or say? Whatever the answer is, it likely has substantial consequences. If it is no, i.e. no truth is ineffable for us, then this might shed light on what reality is like, or what our minds are like, or why the two match up so well. If the answer is yes, some truths are ineffable for us, then this might affect our attempts to understand all of reality. In particular, it might affect the project of metaphysics and its ambition to understand all of reality in its grander features. If we had reason to think that only a limited range of facts can be represented by creatures like us then this might give us reason to think that metaphysics in its ambitious form is beyond what we can hope to carry out successfully. In this paper I will argue that the question whether there are any ineffable truths or facts is an important, although somewhat neglected, question whose answer has significant consequences, and I will make a proposal about what the answer is, on what this answer depends, and what follows from it.

The paper has four parts: first, I will clarify what is at issue and make the notion of the ineffable more precise in several ways. Second, I will argue that there are ineffable truths using several different arguments. These arguments will rely on a certain hidden assumption which is almost universally made implicitly and accepted by most when made explicit, but which I will critically investigate later in the paper, in part four. A third part will attempt to answer a puzzle about the ineffable connected to the relationship between effable and ineffable truths and why the ineffable seems to be more hidden from us than would be suggested merely by the fact that it is ineffable.

The solution to this puzzle will make clear how the ineffable is significant. I will argue that it has important consequences for metaphysics in particular, which suggest modesty instead of ambition. In the fourth part I will have a closer look at a hidden assumption that was relied upon until then, but which might well be mistaken. I will argue that we have good, but not conclusive, reason to think that this assumption is indeed false, and if so then everything changes. On the natural way in which this assumption is false we get no ineffable truths, no modesty in metaphysics, but a form of idealism instead. I will try to make clear that the resulting form of idealism is coherent, significant, and quite possibly true. Whether the crucial assumption is, in the end, true I won't be able to settle here, but we can see that there will be important consequences either way. I will pick sides at the end. But before we can get to all this we need to get clearer about what is at issue.

2. WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

The ineffable naturally appears as a possibility when we think about the relationship between what reality is like, on the one hand, and what we can truly say, on the other. The relationship between these two leads to one unproblematic (for present purposes) area of overlap, and to two more mysterious outlying areas (see Figure 7.1).

The area of overlap is a true description of reality: we can truly say something and reality is like that. Although much can and has been said about how this is to be understood in more detail, I will leave it untouched here, since my concern is with the two more problematic cases: first whether
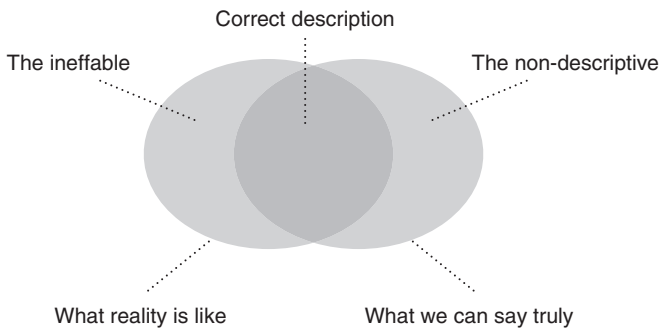

Figure 7.1 The location of the ineffable

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what we can truly say goes beyond what reality is like, and second whether what reality is like goes beyond what we can truly say, which is our main topic. The first possibility might seem incoherent. How could what we can truly say go beyond what reality is like? If we said it truly then how could reality not be like what we said? Those who think that this option is coherent generally maintain that it only seems incoherent to us because we mistake it with something else: either that reality is different from how we say it is (and thus what we say should be false) or else that we say something truly about something other than reality (which isn't an option, since reality is all-inclusive). Instead, they hold, this option is coherent, since we can say something truly that isn't descriptive at all, neither of reality nor anything else. Some parts of speech aim to describe, while other parts aim to do something else, for example express an attitude of the speaker. Truth applies to both, and thus we can say something truly that goes beyond what reality is like. It is true, but doesn't aim to describe reality, and thus reality isn't required to be as described for it to be true. Expressivism about normative discourse combined with minimalism about truth is a paradigmatic instance of this approach. The question, of course, still remains whether it indeed is coherent, but since we will not focus on this outside area in our Venn diagram, we don't have to settle this here. This part of our diagram will only have a minor role in what is to come.

   My main concern is the other outside area: parts of what reality is like that outrun what we can truly say. This is the ineffable, that which we can't say. Here there should at first be no question about its coherence, but there is a real question about whether there is anything which is ineffable. Is there anything that reality is like that goes beyond what we can say, and thus say truly? If so, how much of it is there? Is it merely a little sliver at the edge of the overlap, maybe something related to the paradoxes, or to consciousness, or is it a vast area, maybe most of what reality is like? What would follow for inquiry in general and philosophy in particular if there were a large area of the ineffable? To make progress on these questions we will first need to clarify the relevant notion of the ineffable, and how this problem is different from a number of other problems in the neighborhood. These problems are also real and interesting problems, but not the ones I am trying to make progress on here. My discussion here will focus on a notion of the ineffable that is most promising for it being metaphysically significant, in that it captures the sense in which it just might be that minds and languages like ours are not good enough, in principle, to represent some aspect of reality, and therefore are not good enough for carrying out an ambitious project of metaphysics. Whether or not we are limited in this way is what I hope to find out. And to do this we should put aside some issues that I will not try to resolve and focus in on the relevant ones instead.

Ineffable feelings. First, there is a common use of "words are not enough" to articulate the limits of language, but these are not the limits I am concerned with here. Take, for example "I can't tell you how happy I am to see you!" "Words are not enough to say how glad I am to see you!" It would be beside the point to answer "Are you very, very happy, or even happier than that?" It is not that the first speaker has a degree of happiness such that no words can pick out that degree of happiness. After all, "I am maximally happy" would certainly be good enough to do that. Where words give out is not in describing the degree of happiness, but rather in giving the hearer a sense of what it feels like to be that happy. Words are not enough in getting the hearer to feel the way the speaker feels, or at least give them a sense of what such a feeling is like. But they are enough for describing how happy someone is: very, very happy. That words are not enough to transmit feelings in this sense is notable, but not a limitation of language in capturing what reality is like. Words might also not be enough to get you on the last flight to Raleigh, in the sense that no matter what words you utter, you won't get on that flight. This limitation of language is not one in its descriptive power, but in its limited effects to produce feelings or get an airline seat, a limitation I can happily accept and which isn't my concern here. What I am concerned with here is whether there are any facts, any truths, or any true propositions, such that we cannot, in principle, state or represent these facts, truths, or true propositions in our language.

Ineffable objects. The notion of the ineffable is often tied to objects, and as such it is seen as problematic and paradoxical. An ineffable object is usually understood in one of two ways. It either is one that we can't talk about at all, or it is one about which nothing can be truly said. An example of the former is sometimes taken to be God when God replies to Moses' question about what his name is with "I am who I am," and leaves it more or less at that.[1] One possible lesson of that is that God can't be named, although this seems somewhat incoherent, since I just named God with "God." It is God, after all, who is supposed to be unnameable. Another lesson might be that God shouldn't be named, which wouldn't make God ineffable, of course, just normatively out of the naming game. It wouldn't be a limitation on our representational capacities, just on how we should employ them.

On the other conception of ineffable objects, as ones about which nothing can be truly said, it also is generally taken to lead to a paradoxical conclusion.[2] After all, can't we at least truly say about ineffable objects that nothing can be truly said of them? In this sense ineffable objects can be tied

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[1] Exodus 3: 13–15.
[2] For a discussion of the ineffable in that sense, and a form of an embrace of the apparent paradoxes, see Priest (2002).

to our main concern: ineffable truths or facts. If nothing can be truly said about an object *o* then any fact involving *o* should be ineffable. But the latter, ineffable facts, are not paradoxical. It is not required that nothing can be truly said *about* ineffable facts, only that ineffable facts can't be effed, that is, one can't utter a sentence such that this sentence expresses, states, or represents, that fact. I can't state the fact in question, but I might well be able to say true things about the fact, including that I can't state it. Ineffable facts or truths are not paradoxical, although ineffable objects, that is, objects about which nothing can be truly said, do seem to be paradoxical. An ineffable fact is simply a case where what is true outruns what we can truly say. It is not a paradox, but whether this is ever so is our concern here.

A gap between language and thought? A third topic connected to the ineffable is the question whether there are certain facts or propositions that one can think, but one can't say. That is, are there certain contents that our thoughts can have, but there is no utterance of a sentence that has that same content? Some think that there are. One candidate for this are thoughts that involve phenomenal concepts. Maybe such concepts allow us to think thoughts that we can't put in language. Another, more traditional, example is a version of mysticism. According to it we can attain insights by various means like fasting or mediation, but we can't communicate them to others after we achieve them. These insights are not supposed to be feelings, but instead have propositional content. They are thoughts with contents that can be true or false. However, due to the nature of these contents they cannot be put into language. Although the mystic can think a thought with that content, they can't communicate it with language. You have to meditate/fast/etc. to gain that insight. Whether either one of these cases obtains is controversial, of course, but this controversy does not matter now. I am not concerned with whether there are some limitations of language that are not limitations of thought. Instead I am concerned with whether there are certain facts or truths that are simply beyond us in either way, be it thought or language. I want to find out whether there are truths that we cannot represent at all, be it in language or be it in thought. Thus from now on I will take the ineffable to be that which we can neither think nor say. Whether there is a gap between language and thought thus won't matter for what is to come, interesting as the question is otherwise.

Conceptual representation vs. other representation. Our issue here is not whether we can represent everything in some way or other, but rather whether for every fact or truth we can have a conceptual representation of that fact or truth. It might well be that something ineffable is going on right over there, and I could pull out my camera and take a picture of it, and thus represent it in some way. The issue is not whether I can always do that, but

rather whether there is a conceptual representation of every fact or truth. Conceptual representations are paradigmatically the kind of representation we have in thought or language. The ineffable concerns the limits of conceptual representation, not the limit of representation more generally.

Fine vs. coarse contents. If the proposition that I am hungry now is different from the proposition that TH is hungry at *t* then this truth likely is ineffable for everyone but me right now. You would only be able to express it if you were me and even then only at that particular time. This would make these truths ineffable, not because minds like ours can't represent them, but because of who and when you need to be to represent it. If contents are that fine-grained then it is trivial, but insignificant, that there are many ineffable truths. To get a more interesting question we should see whether there are still ineffable truths even if we consider contents more coarse-grained where perspectival elements like who, when, and where, you are do not matter. We will thus from now on assume that contents are coarse-grained enough so that perspectival elements don't matter, or alternatively, we consider something ineffable if it can't be represented no matter who, where, and when, you are.

To focus on coarse-grained contents in the following is not to take sides in the debate whether contents are best taken to be fine-grained or coarse-grained. It is rather to take sides on the question what the proper notion of the ineffable is for which we should find out whether there are any ineffable aspects of reality. If we use a notion of the ineffable tied to fine-grained contents the answer is clearly that there are ineffable truths, but that answer doesn't have any interesting consequences, it is simply guaranteed by how fine-grained contents are. The interesting question remains whether there are ineffable truths when considering a notion of the ineffable tied to coarse-grain contents. That question is not trivial, and has the potential to lead to substantial consequences. We will thus consider contents to be coarse-grained in the following.

***De facto* ineffable vs. completely ineffable.** We need to be clearer on how the "can" in "can't be thought or said" should be understood when we consider the ineffable. It is uncontroversial that there is a sense of "can" such that there are some facts or propositions that we can neither think nor say. But whether we are also limited in a more permissive sense of "can" is controversial and a harder and more interesting question. To illustrate the difference, take the complete sand-metric of planet earth: the precise distance that every grain of sand on earth presently has to every other one. Since there are about 10^{24} or so grains of sand on earth this is an incredibly complex fact. No human being will ever be able to say or think that content. But this is merely due to a limitation of resources, in particular time. Since we have a short lifespan we will run out of time before we will be done to think or say that truth. It is, as we can call it, *de facto* ineffable. We can

represent every part of it, in that for each pair of grains of sand we can say what their distance is. The whole, ineffable fact is just a conjunction of many effable facts. This fact is beyond us in the sense that it is too long and complex, but it is not beyond us in the sense that our representational capacities are not suitable to represent it in principle. If we had more time we could do it. We can thus distinguish the *de facto* ineffable, which is what we can't think or say, from the *completely ineffable*, which is what we can't think or say even with unlimited resources like time and memory. Some contents we can't think since we are limited on a certain scale. The question remains whether there are any that we can't think in principle, even if we allow ourselves unlimited resources on this scale. How to make this precise is, of course, not completely clear, but the examples of limited time and memory are clear ones that give us a limitation on a certain scale, and there might be other similar ones. The real question for us here is whether we are also limited in other ways, in ways that overcoming limitations of time and memory won't help. Are there contents that we are simply incapable of thinking or saying, in principle, in that a mind like ours just can't represent them conceptually? Are there facts that are simply beyond creatures like us, even with unlimited time to say or think them? This is the question I hope to make progress on. Thus from here on, when I wonder whether there is anything ineffable I will thus ask whether anything is completely ineffable in the above sense. The completely ineffable is the notion of the ineffable of interest here. As will become clear below, this won't settle what should count as something that we can in principle do. Here that notion can be made precise in various ways, leading to various more precise notions of the ineffable. All of them are equally good notions, but we need to focus on the one that leads to the most interesting and most significant question about whether or not there are ineffable facts. We will revisit this issue below.

Ineffable for whom?   The issue I hope to make progress on is not one about what can be represented in language in principle, but instead is what we human beings can represent. It is about whether the world outruns our representational capacities, the ones we can employ. We won't be concerned here with whether there could be a language suitable for other creatures that captures everything, or whether other creatures could think everything. Our topic is whether we can capture everything. Naturally, we should be concerned with whether anything is in principle ineffable for us. And this question is not about what language in general can represent, or what we could do if we were gods, with completely different minds, but what we, the kinds of creatures we in fact are, can do.

Aspects.   I stated the main question as whether there are ineffable aspects of reality. This should not be taken as indicating that the issue is whether

reality as a whole has some ineffable feature. I could have also asked whether there are certain parts of reality that are ineffable, but this might have suggested that some spatiotemporal part is full of ineffable facts. My concern is whether any truths or facts are ineffable. If the answer is "yes" then presumably it won't just be a single instance. Any one ineffable fact will be closely tied to others, and such ineffable facts considered as groups of connected facts can be seen as giving us an ineffable aspect of reality. Nothing should hang on that terminology, though.

Ineffable vs. unknowable vs. incomprehensible. Finally, we need to distinguish the ineffable from the incomprehensible or unknowable. It is unknowable, I take it, whether the number of grains of sand on planet earth on February 18, 1923, was odd or even. But it is not ineffable. I can think the thought that it was odd on that day, and the thought that it was even. Anything that is ineffable is unknowable, given standard assumptions about knowledge involving at least a representation of what is supposed to be known, but not the other way round. Similarly, some things might be beyond what we can understand or comprehend, but they are not thereby ineffable. It might be incomprehensible why there is anything at all, but it isn't ineffable that there is anything at all. The ineffable is simply concerned with what we can represent. It is not an epistemic notion, but one about our representational capacities.[3]

Our question thus is this: are there any facts, truths, or true propositions, such that we cannot, in principle, represent them in either thought or language, even given arbitrary resources like time and memory, and even when we individuate facts and propositions coarsely enough to leave aside perspectival limitations? Since this is a yes–no question there are two possible answers. We need to find out which one is the right one, and what follows from it.[4] If the answer is "no" then all aspects of reality are effable for us, and the following effability thesis is true:

[3] Others are concerned with the ineffable in these other senses. See, for example, Moore (2003a, 2003b). Colin McGinn proposed that the reason why we make no progress in philosophy is tied to our cognitive limitations, but it is not clear whether his position is best understood as being tied to a limit of what we can represent, or instead a limit of what we can understand. See McGinn (1989) or (1993).

[4] It could be that although one answer is true in letter, the other is true in spirit. Maybe there are some isolated facts tied to the paradoxes which can't be represented in any thought or language, but we can represent the rest. One unsuccessful way to argue for this is to consider the fact that for some object *o*, nothing about *o* is ever represented. That fact about *o* can't be represented without failing to obtain. And there certainly can be some objects *o* about which no fact is ever represented. But this doesn't show that this fact can't be represented, only that when it is represented then it won't be a fact any more. The content that nothing about *o* is ever represented is perfectly representable by us, even if we never do represent it. We can represent it, and in those counterfactual circumstances it is a false proposition, while in actuality it is a true proposition. The limits of what can be represented are not that easily drawn. Thanks here to A. W. Moore.

(1) The effability thesis. Everything is effable.

If the answer is "yes" then some aspects of reality are ineffable for us, and so the ineffability thesis is true:

(2) The ineffability thesis. Something is ineffable.

As we saw above, what is at issue is whether any fact, proposition, or content, is ineffable, or whether all of them are effable. And that is to ask whether it is true that for every proposition p, there is a speech act we can perform, or thought we can think, that has p as its content. A proposition is effable in speech, we can say, just in case some utterance that we can make has that proposition as its content. And for that to be true there has to be some sentence and some context in which we might utter the sentence, such that this utterance of that sentence in that context has the proposition p as its content. A proposition is effable in thought, correspondingly, if we can have some propositional attitude, a judgment or a belief, that has that proposition as its content. In either case, effability in thought or language, we would need some representation of the proposition, either mental or linguistic, that has the proposition as its content, in the particular context it is employed. Whether this is so for all propositions is what we need to find out. I will argue that we should think that the ineffability thesis is true, at least granting widely shared assumptions.

3. IN SUPPORT OF THE INEFFABLE

Leaving aside those who hold certain unusual views, to which we will get later, everyone should believe that there are ineffable facts in our sense. But few live up to what follows from that, in particular for metaphysics. In this section we will see a number of good arguments for there being ineffable facts, and we will look at what we can say about what such facts or truths are like. It might be tempting to say that there can be no good argument given by us for there being an ineffable fact, since such a fact could not be specified by us, and thus no example of such a fact could ever be given. Although it is true that we cannot give an example of such a fact, in that we can never truly say that the fact that . . . is ineffable, there are nonetheless a number of powerful arguments that there are such facts. We can argue for there being certain things without giving examples of them, but instead by general arguments that make it reasonable to accept that there are such things nonetheless. The most important arguments for this seem to me to be the following.

3.1 Built-in cognitive limitations

The thoughts we can think must fit into our minds. And our minds think a certain way; they have a certain cognitive setup. So any thought we can think must have a content that a mind like ours can represent. But our minds didn't develop with reality as a whole as their representational goal. They developed to deal with situations that creatures like us have to deal with to make it: midsize objects that are reasonably stable and have stable properties, some of which need to be eaten, some of which need to be avoided, and so on. The question is why we should think that a mind that developed to deal with problems in this limited situation and under those selection pressures should be good enough to represent everything there is to represent about all of reality. We know that not all of reality is like the world of stable midsize objects. The very small is very different than that, for example. We should thus expect that a mind that has developed like ours won't be suitable for all of reality. Our biological setup imposes a constraint on how we must think. This constraint arose in response to selection pressures that came from a special kind of an environment. We can expect minds like ours to be good enough to deal with the situation they evolved to deal with, but not good enough to deal with any situation whatsoever. Thus we should expect that our mind has a hardwired constraint on what it can represent.[5]

3.2 The argument from analogy

Although we can't give an example of a fact ineffable for us, we can give examples of facts that are ineffable for other, simpler creatures. Take a honeybee, which can represent various things about its environment like where the nectar is, but it is in principle incapable of representing that there is an economic crisis in Greece. Its mind is just not suitable to represent such facts, even though it can represent other facts. That there is an economic crisis in Greece is a fact ineffable for the honeybee, but not for us. But we can imagine that there are other creatures that relate to us like we relate to the honeybee. We can imagine that there are vastly superior aliens or gods, say, who look down at us like we look down at the honeybee. And analogously, they would say that we humans can't possibly represent that *p*, while they clearly can. They would be able to give examples of facts that are ineffable for us, but not for them. Whether or not there really are such

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[5] See Fodor (1983), 119ff; Nagel (1986), 90ff; and Chomsky (1975). Chomsky's views on this matter are more carefully discussed in Collins (2002), which contains many references to particular passages of Chomsky's work.

aliens or gods doesn't matter for this argument. The point simply is that this analogous reasoning makes clear that we should expect there to be such facts that could be mentioned by the aliens or gods as ineffable for us, but not for them. The facts are there, whether the aliens or gods are there or not.[6]

It might well be that the honeybee's representations are not conceptual representations and thus might not have propositional contents at all, but merely indicate something about the world. They might carry information, but not have propositional content.[7] But this doesn't really change the situation. Just as we can point to information that the honeybee can't carry with its representational capacities, aliens might point to propositional contents that we can't represent conceptually, besides higher forms of representation that they have in addition. In the end we should think of what can be represented by us as being somewhere on a scale, with the honeybee on one side of us, and other creatures, real or imagined, on the other. And what those further over on the scale can represent is ineffable for us, and thus we should think that some aspects of reality are ineffable for us.

3.3 Cardinality arguments

Our language is built up from finitely many basic vocabulary items with finitely many ways to combine them to give us a sentence, which has to be of finite length. Thus overall we have countably many sentences available to represent reality. Similar considerations at the level of concepts support that we can have at most countably many types of thoughts. But there are uncountably many facts or propositions to be represented. Here is a simple argument: for every real number r there is the fact that r is a real number. For different real numbers these facts are different, and since there are uncountably many real numbers there are uncountably many facts to be represented.

Although such cardinality arguments are very powerful, the simple outline given above is a bit too quick. Although it is true that there are only countably many sentences in our languages, this does not guarantee that we can only represent countably many facts. We can use the same sentence to represent different facts on different uses of this sentence, as with sentences that contain indexicals or demonstratives like "I'll have another one of those." But while this is correct, it is not clear how this would help even with the simple argument using the real numbers. Demonstratives and context sensitivity don't seem to help much in referring to real numbers, and that was only the most simple and straightforward cardinality argument. More generally, we can argue that whatever the cardinality of the set of effable facts might be, we can take some set S of larger cardinality, and then consider for every a which is a member of S, the fact that a is a member of

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[6] See Nagel (1986), 95f.   [7] See Dretske (1981).

S. There are just as many such facts as there are members of S, and thus most of these facts must be ineffable. Overall then we should thus expect that the cardinality of facts we can represent is smaller than the cardinality of all facts.

3.4 Explaining effability

If nothing is ineffable then the effability thesis is true and thus what facts obtain and which facts we can represent are exactly the same. But those are two very different things which would then exactly coincide. What we can represent is one thing, what reality is like is at first a quite different thing. If they coincide then we should ask for an explanation of why these two things coincide. It is conceivable that they do coincide. Maybe our representational capacities have reached the limit of what can be represented. Maybe we just made it to the top, while other creatures, including our ancestors, were still on the way up, unlikely as all this may be. Maybe the world is simple enough so that we can represent all of it. Maybe we got lucky and are able to represent every fact. The effability thesis could be true, by accident, but does it have to be true? If the effability thesis is true, then we should ask for an explanation of why it is true. And if no such explanation is forthcoming we should expect that it isn't true. We shouldn't expect that two different things coincide, and without an explanation of the effability thesis we should expect it to be false. But what could explain that what reality is like and what we can represent about it coincide?

The most natural way one might try to explain why what reality is like and what we can represent coincide is via a connection of what reality is like and our representational capacities. One route for such a connection is of limited use: what reality is like affects what we can represent. This route can explain why our representations are sometimes accurate, but not why they exhaust all of reality. That reality affects and forms our representational capacities makes plausible that we sometimes represent correctly, but it doesn't explain why we can represent all of reality. The other route is more promising here: what reality is like is affected by our representational capacities, in particular, what there is to represent about reality is due to us and our minds. This is a version of idealism, and it is in a sense the natural companion of the effability thesis. Reality is guaranteed to be effable by us in its entirety, since we, in particular our representational capacities, are responsible for what there is and what it is like. No wonder our minds are good enough for all of reality, since reality somehow comes from our minds.

Idealism could in principle explain why the effability thesis holds, but we have good reason to think that this form of idealism is false. That is, we have good reason to think that reality does not depend on us in the alluded to sense: what there is and what it is like does not depend on us in a natural sense of dependence. There would have been electrons and they would be

like what they are in fact like even if we wouldn't have existed, and so electrons and what they are like don't depend on us. Furthermore, there was a time before there were human beings when reality was otherwise pretty much as it is now. So, in a natural sense of dependence, reality doesn't depend on us globally. These are simple and possibly naive arguments, but if idealism should explain why the effability thesis holds it will need to be spelled out in a way that makes sense of a dependence of reality on us that can support and explain the effability thesis. There certainly are options on the table. One could try to analyze the content of statements of dependence in a way that makes them acceptable to idealism. Or one could develop the idealism in a way that places us in some sense outside of time, and connect time and the temporal aspect of reality to us as well. One version of this is well known (Kant 1781), but it is not clear whether it is coherent, what a coherent formulation would look like, and whether it is compatible with other things we take ourselves to know to be true. An idealist explanation is in principle possible, but ones along the lines outlined above seem to have little going for them.

The idealist strategy to explain the effability thesis outlined above in effect connects two versions of idealism. Of those two one is reasonably taken to be false, and the other is closely tied to our main topic. To introduce some terminology, let us call *ontological idealism* the view that what there is depends on minds, in particular our minds, in a sense to be made more precise. Let us call *conceptual idealism* the view that what in principle can be truly said or thought about reality, what the range of the conceptual or propositional is that can be employed in principle to apply to reality, depends on us, in a sense to be spelled out. Conceptual idealism is in essence the view that the effability thesis holds not by mere accident, but for a reason tied to us. Conceptual idealism combines the effability thesis with a certain explanation of why it holds. Ontological idealism could support conceptual idealism. If what there is depends on us then one way this could be would tie what there is and what it is like to our representational capacities, in a way that would guarantee the truth of the effability thesis. But ontological idealism is false, or so we have good reason to think. The question remains whether conceptual idealism is nonetheless true, for other reasons. Could conceptual idealism be true even though ontological idealism is false? For that to be so the effability thesis has to be true, and it has to be true for a certain reason, not just by accident. So far we have seen no reason why that should be so; to the contrary, we have seen that there is little hope to explain why the effability thesis might hold. However, we will revisit this connection below, in section 5.8, where this possibility is seriously explored. But without such reasons being on the horizon so far, we should side with the ineffability thesis and accept that reality outruns what we can represent about it.

3.5 The sources of ineffability

We have seen the outlines of four strong arguments for there being ineffable facts. Three direct ones, and one indirect one, via there being no good explanation why the effability thesis should be true. The smart money is thus on there being ineffable facts, even though we cannot give an example. Before we can see what follows from this we should think a bit about what such facts might be like, and how they might be similar or different from effable facts in various ways. The easiest way to approach this question is to think about how our representations of facts might be limited. And the easiest way to do that is to think about the paradigmatic way in which we represent the world: with a subject–predicate sentence, representing an object having a property. How might such a way to represent the world be limited? There are three ways in which we might be limited with such representations: (1) we might not be able to represent a certain object; (2) we might not be able to represent a certain property; or (3) the structure of a subject–predicate sentence might not be suitable to represent a certain truth or fact. Let's look at them in turn to see which ones are the likely sources of our limitation.

Missing objects. We might be unable to talk or think about some objects. To illustrate, let's consider one way this could be, namely that singular thought and singular reference require a causal connection between us and the object we think or talk about. This gives rise to two possible limitations: objects that are not causally efficacious at all, and objects that are causally efficacious in general, but that are not causally related to us. Focusing on the second case first, we can note that we are not causally connected to all objects in the universe, for example not those that are outside of our light cone. Under those conditions we would thus be unable to have singular thoughts about everything outside of our light cone. This would give us lots of ineffable truths: all those that involve the objects we can't have singular thoughts about. Thus assuming, again only for the moment, that if causal connection is required for singular representation then all these truths are examples of ineffable truths.

The notion of the ineffable on which this is true is not the notion we should be concerned with. It concerns merely the *de facto* ineffable, not the completely ineffable. All that is missing in this case is our causal contact to the object. This is something we could have if only we were closer to the object, close enough to have it inside of our light cone so that a causal connection could obtain. Given where we are and where the object is (and the assumed requirement on singular thought) we can't think singular thoughts about that object. But we could think these thoughts if we were closer. So, in a sense the ineffability of truths involving such objects is due to

our placement in the world, how we are causally isolated from them, but not due to our representational capacities not being good enough. If we were closer then our capacities would be all that is needed.

The issue is what we should keep fixed and what we should allow to vary when we ask whether we *can* think a thought. We want to keep fixed our basic cognitive setup, but we should not fix the place in the world where we happen to be located. This is part of what we need to get clear on when we try to determine what the proper notion of the ineffable is that we should be concerned with. The ineffable is that which we can't say or think, but "can" can be understood in many ways and on each precisification of "can" do we get a more precise and specific notion of the ineffable. On a notion where we fix our place in the world we might get ineffable truths about far away objects, but that is not the notion of the ineffable that is tied to the worries about our minds not being good enough to carry out ambitious metaphysics. The more interesting and more significant notion is thus the one where we do not fix our place in the world.

One way to illustrate the relevant notion of a truth being beyond us in principle is the *incommunicability test*: some other creature who can represent that truth couldn't communicate it to us in principle, no matter how hard they tried. If we were to encounter some creature who can represent that truth, and who has mastered our language and thus can communicate with us in general, then this creature would nonetheless be unable to communicate this truth to us. We are limited in this case that we can't represent this truth no matter what help we might get. Even someone who can represent this truth couldn't help us to do better.

Consider for our case of missing objects someone who can represent a content involving an object that is beyond us. That person could communicate this content to us, and thereby allow us to think about that object. Suppose, for purposes of illustration again, a highly advanced alien creature is talking to us and it can represent everything there is to represent, and in particular it can refer to all objects. The alien could then help us to the contents that we couldn't get without it since these contents involve objects that are otherwise beyond our referential reach. The alien could just tell us what its name for that object is, and we can then refer to the object in question with that name, just as we in general exploit the referential success of other humans when we refer to objects we learn about from them. The referential connection can be mediated via others, be they humans, aliens, or gods. That is how we manage to refer to Socrates, after all. Thus even going back to our illustration of the need for a causal connection in our unaided situation for reference to an object, this is not an in principle limitation. Gods or aliens that are not limited this way could allow us to piggyback on their success, not just with faraway objects, but even with objects that are causally

inert. Reference to an object is thus not a limitation that applies to us in principle, unless of course some objects are in principle beyond what can be referred to, even by God, but we have no reason to think that this is the case.

Even if aliens or gods could help us to access all objects, they might not be able to help us with other cases of a source of the ineffable. There might be some truths where the alien would have to tell us that although it can think and say them, it can't communicate them to us, since creatures like us just can't grasp them.[8] If there is ineffability of this later kind it would have to go beyond merely inaccessible objects. And whether some part of reality is like that, not just in fact out of our reach, but in principle beyond creatures like us to grasp, that is the interesting question that might have significant consequences for metaphysics.

The interesting notion of the ineffable is thus the one that goes beyond a limitation to think about or refer to particular objects. We could make the notion of the ineffable more precise along the lines where a limitation to refer to objects would make a fact involving that object ineffable, and we could make it precise where it wouldn't. Both are perfectly good notions of the ineffable, but the more interesting one is the latter, which passes the incommunicability test. To make this explicit, we should take the ineffable to be the *object-permitting ineffable*: that which is completely ineffable even if we allow ourselves access to all objects. Our arguments above for there being ineffable facts did not on the face of it rely on just a limitation to refer to objects, and thus these arguments should still be compelling even with the notion of the ineffable as being object-permitting. What makes ineffable facts beyond us is thus not simply objects which are referentially inaccessible. The real source of ineffability lies somewhere else.

Missing properties. The same issue now arises with properties. What if there are some properties that we, somehow, can't represent? And in the case of properties we might have to distinguish two ways in which we might fail to represent them. First, it might be that the situation with properties is very much like the one with objects. Properties, one could argue, are simply things or entities, just like regular objects. We might be unable to pick out that entity with a term that denotes it. But here the aliens might again be able to help us out. They might give us a name to use that refers to the property that otherwise was beyond our referential abilities. Second, we might be able to fail to represent that property in a simple subject–predicate sentence "a is F." Maybe we can't have a predicate "is F" without outside help, and this might be a source of ineffability for us. Here, too, the

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[8] A version of this scenario is described in the novel *The Ophiuchi Hotline* by John Varley (1977). Thanks to David Baker for this reference.

issue arises if the aliens could do it for us. Could they just let us use one of their predicates, say "is wallereanesfsa?" This might be enough for representing even if it isn't enough for understanding what we thereby represent. And there is an issue whether or not the two cases are really different. After all, _a_ is F just in case _a_ has Fness. If the aliens give us a name for Fness then maybe this is all we need to represent that _a_ is F, and thus the case of properties really reduces to the case of objects.

All this might go too far, but it can be taken even further. Facts, truths, or propositions, too, can be seen as entities. And if we can refer to any objects or properties, why not to any fact or proposition? Any proposition _p_ is equivalent to the proposition that _p_ is true. And we can eff the truth predicate which is all that we need besides the name for the proposition to state something equivalent to _p_.[9] Can we really be satisfied with a sense of the effable where we eff every truth _t_ since aliens or gods could give us a name for _t_, and we can eff that _t_ has the property of being true? This is clearly unsatisfactory in some ways, and might appear to be a too shallow victory for the effability thesis. But what precisely is unsatisfactory about it?

One concern is about what counts as the same fact or proposition. The equivalence of _p_ and it's true that _p_ holds in the sense that it is necessary that if one is true then so is the other. A more fine-grained notion of equivalence might separate these two propositions or contents, and effing one of them might then not be enough to eff the other. On the other hand, a too fine-grained notion of equivalence trivializes the issue in favor of the ineffability thesis, as we saw above in our brief discussion of perspectival contents.

It is preferable to take a theory-neutral and coarse-grained notion of contents or propositions and then to avoid trivializing the issue in other ways. And here there is a good middle ground. On the one hand we didn't want to accept the ineffability thesis simply on the grounds that some objects are too distant from us in spacetime for us to refer to them. This is a restriction that is not one "in principle" in a sense analogous to the restrictions of time and memory not being restrictions in principle. But allowing objects to be free threatens to trivialize the issue, since properties and, in particular, propositions or contents themselves can be seen as objects, too. We can reach a middle ground by allowing us objects to be free, but explicitly excluding objects or entities that are content-like objects, for example propositions or facts. This leaves us with a substantial question to consider. We can remain neutral, as should become clear shortly, on

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[9] Whether we indeed have a truth predicate that could be used to apply to any proposition whatsoever is controversial (see Field (1994)), but for the moment we can leave that issue aside.

whether we also have to exclude properties from the objects we get for free.[10] The reason for that is that the real worry about ineffability comes not from there being ineffable properties, but from somewhere else.

Missing structure. We represent the world paradigmatically with representations that have subject–predicate structure. But why should we think that representations that have this structure are enough to represent everything there is to represent? We can represent truths with other structures as well, but that only pushes the issue towards all those structures together. We have good reason to think that there is more to reality than objects having properties. Many of our own representations of reality are not in the subject–predicate form. Consider, for example, explanatory relationships: p because q. That is not a simple subject–predicate sentence, but a complex sentence with a sentential connective "because." Since the negation of such a sentence is also not in subject–predicate form, some such representations are true. And thus some sentences of this kind truly describe reality, unless all non-subject–predicate sentences are systematically non-descriptive, analogous to an expressivist treatment of normative discourse. But this last qualification is too far-fetched to be a real limitation. We have lots of good reasons to think that sentences that are not in subject–predicate form are not systematically different from those that are in their attempts to describe reality. Since it isn't clear how the same fact could be represented with a simple subject–predicate sentence it seems that some facts about reality require a representation with a different structure than that of a subject–predicate representation.[11] Of course, in this case we do have the resources to represent these facts. We do have a sentential connective that allows us to represent explanatory relationships. But the worry is that if subject–predicate representations in general are not enough, and sometimes extra resources are needed, then why think that we have all these extra resources available to us? Even if we could access all objects and all properties, the worry would remain whether we can represent all the facts, since apparently some of the facts we can represent require a representation with a structure different from a subject–predicate one. And

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[10] A further worry about properties trivializing the debate is this. If p is the case then any object has the property of being such that p is the case. Thus if all properties are free then this connection gives us at least a truth conditional equivalent content for any proposition p. Whether it gives us the same content can be further debated, of course. Not to trivialize the issue in this way we would again need to restrict the properties that come for free, for example to ones that distinguish between objects in the same world, or some other way.

[11] I am now leaving aside the issue discussed above about trivializing this by taking every proposition p to be equivalent to p being true, which is in subject–predicate form, or by taking p to be equivalent to the universe having the property of things are being such that p.

once we recognize that we can, wonder why we should think that our minds have access to all the structures required to represent all facts. Why think that the kinds of representations that are available in human languages and to human minds are good enough to represent all facts and truths? We can say that a fact is *structurally ineffable* if the source of its ineffability is the required structure of a representation of it, i.e. a structure we do not have access to.[12] Structural ineffability gets at the heart of the matter. Any limitation of this kind would pass the incommunicability test: if there are facts that cannot be represented by representations available to the human mind then aliens who do not have this limitation could not communicate them to us. These facts would be in principle beyond us, not just due to our location, our access to objects, but due to the nature of our minds. These facts would be ineffable for us in the sense that matters.

The arguments for there being ineffable facts discussed above support there being ineffable facts in this sense: structurally ineffable facts. Just as the mind of simpler creatures doesn't have the basic representational resources to represent all facts, so we should think by analogy and due to our built-in cognitive setup, that some facts are beyond what creatures like us can represent in principle. To represent such facts would require access to ways of representing the world which are beyond those available to our minds. This is what the arguments for the ineffable point to, and this is what has significant consequences for metaphysics. It is now time to see what follows from it.

4. THE SUB-ALGEBRA HYPOTHESIS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

4.1 The hiddenness of the ineffable

Suppose then that we should accept that some aspects of reality are ineffable for us, in the sense that the human mind is not in principle capable of representing them in thought or language. What should we conclude from this? Even though I suspect many would accept that we are limited in what we can represent, few draw much of a conclusion from this. But it could be taken to lead to a largely negative and skeptical conclusion about inquiry in general and our attempts to find out what reality is like. I believe that there are indeed significant conclusions to be drawn, but they are neither that broad nor that skeptical. But to see what we should properly conclude from the ineffable we need to get clear on one further aspect of the ineffable that is puzzling. This is the problem why the

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[12] For an argument that structural ineffability is impossible, see Filcheva (2015).

ineffable is so well hidden from us. Any fact that is ineffable would make it hidden from us in the sense that we can't represent it. But if there are indeed ineffable facts then they are more hidden from us than simply being unrepresentable, as I hope to make clear shortly. This extra-hiddenness is puzzling, and points to an account of the relationship between effable and ineffable facts, which in turn is significant for what we should conclude from there being ineffable facts for the limits of human inquiry. To illustrate all this, let us first see how the ineffable is more hidden than it needs to be.

A first thing to note is that we never seem to perceive something ineffable. This is not a triviality. We can well wonder why it is never the case that we perceive something that we simply cannot describe or represent in thought. In such a situation we would be perceptually connected to a fact which we cannot represent in thought or language, and realize that our representational capacities give out here. Why does this never happen? It is not inconceivable that one day we open a door, look inside, and recognize that what we see is simply beyond what we can describe in words. All we can say is just "wow!" We see something that we can't represent conceptually, while at the same time realizing that what we see is simply beyond us conceptually. It is hard to imagine what that would be like in more detail, in part because it never happens, in part because we might have to rely on our concepts in imagination. The question is why this never happens. One answer, of course, would be that the effability thesis is true and nothing is ineffable, but there are also other possible explanations. One of them could come from the philosophy of perception. It might be that everything we perceive has to be conceptualized, and what we perceive has to be tied to the conceptual content of the perception. Since conceptual content, involving our concepts, can be represented by us, it is no wonder that what we perceive can be represented by us.[13]

But even if we could explain why we never perceive the ineffable without relying on the effability thesis, the question remains why we nonetheless never encounter the ineffable in other ways. It might be that what we perceive has to be conceptualized, and thus is effable, for reasons having to do with how perception works. But this doesn't answer the question why we nonetheless apparently never encounter the ineffable in other ways. Even if we never perceive it directly, we might realize that there is something ineffable right here, behind this door. In such case we could realize that what we can perceive of the situation is effable, but there is more to it than what we can perceive, in the sense of represent in perception. This would be a scenario where we encounter the ineffable, and we recognize that what we encounter is ineffable. This could not just happen in unusual situations, but

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[13] One way this might go is, of course, in Kant (1781).

it could conceivably be part of regular scientific theorizing. We might recognize regularly during inquiry that now we are approaching the limits of what we can represent, and that the answer to our problem lies beyond it. But why does this never seem to happen, given all the reasons we have seen for there being ineffable facts? Why is the ineffable so well hidden from us and apparently so irrelevant for our attempts to understand various parts of the world in inquiry? The ineffable seems to fall out of the picture and for all intents and purposes every fact we encounter is effable. This naturally gives rise to the impression that the effability thesis should be true, even though we have good reason to think it is false. To properly appreciate the significance of the ineffable we need to get clear on why the effable facts seem to be all the ones we ever encounter.

4.2 The sub-algebra hypothesis

If we accept the arguments for there being ineffable facts then we need to understand how they might be related to the effable ones, in particular why the ineffable facts seem to be as irrelevant to ordinary inquiry as they seem to be, and why they are so well-hidden from us. What could explain that the possibly vast range of ineffable facts is systematically hidden from us in a stronger way than is suggested by their being merely ineffable? There is a way to understand this which seems to me to be the best way to make sense of it, and it is best spelled out with a mathematical analogy.

Consider a simple mathematical structure, say the integers with addition, multiplication, and subtraction:

$$\ldots -3, -2, -1, 0, 1, 2, 3, \ldots (+, \times, -)$$

The integers are closed under these three arithmetical operations. The sum, product, or subtraction of any two integers is always another integer. The integers with these operations thus form an algebraic structure. This structure corresponds to a language suitable to describe it: it has a name for each integer, and function symbols for each operation, and additional basic logical vocabulary.[14] This we could call the language of the (particular instance of) the structure.

Now consider the world, so to speak, from the point of view of an integer, thinking about the integers with that structure. The integers, I imagine for the sake of the example, can capture the world in terms of the language of their structure. And from their point of view it will seem perfectly natural,

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[14] The additional vocabulary would in this case just include "=" and Boolean connectives. I don't allow variables or quantifiers here for the sake of the example.

even obvious, that the integers is all there is. After all, the sum of any two of them is always another integer, and so is the product or subtraction. Furthermore, any question the integers can ask about the world in their language will have an answer that can be stated in their language. What's 7×8? It's another integer. We can say that in their situation they enjoy *question–answer completeness*: if you can state the question then you can state the answer. From the point of view of the integers, they naturally take it that they can capture all of reality there is to capture. If we were integers with those representational resources it would seem compelling to us that the integers is all there is.

All this would be so even if numerical reality is much richer than that, with the integers being embedded in different, larger structures, for example the rational numbers with the above operations as well as also division:

$$... - 3... - 2... - 1... - \frac{1}{2}...0...\frac{1}{2}...1...2...3... \quad (+, \times, -, \div)$$

Here there are infinitely many other numbers between any two integers, getting arbitrarily close to them. The rational numbers, just like the integers, are closed under addition, subtraction and multiplication. In addition the rational numbers are closed under division (leaving out 0, as usual), whereas the integers are not. Although the integers are embedded in the rational numbers, the other rational numbers are completely hidden from them. Since the integers form a sub-structure, or sub-algebra, of the rational numbers with addition, multiplication, and subtraction, these other rational numbers can never be reached from the integers with those operations: they always lead back to the integers. But if the integers just had access to division, say, then they could get out of their sub-algebra and reach the rest of the rational numbers. And if we would add just one more rational number, say $\frac{1}{2}$, to them then they could use that to reach lots of other rational numbers: $1\frac{1}{2}$, $2\frac{1}{2}$ and so on. But from the point of view of the integers, they are all there is. And this will seem clear and compelling to them, since after all, given their resources, what else could there be? Sums and products of integers are always integers. This is so even though the integers are surrounded by and thinly spread among things that are not integers. These other aspects of numerical reality are completely hidden from them.

This could be our situation. The parts of reality that we can represent might form a sub-algebra of all of reality. That is to say, it might be that we can represent certain objects, events, and propositions, and certain relations or operations on them such that whenever we apply the operations to things we can represent we get something that we can represent as well. Whenever we can represent an event, say, then we can represent the cause of that event.

Whenever we can represent a fact we can represent the explanation of that fact, and so on. Our representational system might be a closed structure analogous to an algebraic structure. And that structure might be a sub-structure or sub-algebra of all of reality. This hypothesis we can call *the sub-algebra hypothesis*: the hypothesis that what we can represent forms a proper sub-structure of all there is to represent. It is based on the analogy to an algebraic structure and a sub-algebra of it. If it were correct then we would be much like the integers. We can never represent aspects of the much richer reality we are part of, but it would seem to us that the parts of reality we can represent are all there is. After all, all operations and relations that we can represent and that hold among things we can represent lead to things we can represent. So, from our point of view, what else could there be? Everything else would be systematically hidden from us. Similarly, we should expect that we have question–answer completeness, and so for any question we can ask we can state the answer (whether or not we can know that this is the correct answer). If this is our situation then it would appear to us that everything is effable, even though what we can eff is surrounded by, and possibly thinly spread among, the ineffable. We can never get there from our point of view, and it will be completely hidden from us.

   In considering this hypothesis we can note right away that it can't be quite our situation. First of all, we don't enjoy question–answer completeness in the way the integers would. If the effability thesis is true then, of course, we can state any answer to any question since we can state everything. But if the ineffability thesis is true then we can ask questions where we know we can't state the answer, for example "What are all the ineffable truths?" Still, we might enjoy *large-scale question–answer completeness*, which is question–answer completeness leaving aside questions that deal with the ineffable and related questions. In general, and for almost all cases, it might be that if we can state the question, we can state the answer. And just this seems to be the case. When we ask what caused something, or what explains something, then we can in general at least state the answer, even if we don't know that it is the right answer. This fact we can understand on the sub-algebra hypothesis even if the ineffability thesis is true: causal and explanatory relations are ones under which our structure is closed. We can represent the explanations of what we can represent, and we can represent the causes of what we can represent. And again, all this could be true even though we are surrounded by the ineffable. And just like the very same arithmetical operations of multiplication and addition can be seen as applying to the integers as well as the rational numbers, so causal and explanatory relations might hold among the facts or events we can represent as well as those that are ineffable for us. The ineffable aspects of reality might be very much like the ones we can eff, just outside of our sub-structure, or they might be completely different.

The sub-algebra hypothesis would explain why the ineffable is systematically hidden from us even though it is possibly a vast part of reality. Since it is outside of our sub-algebra we won't encounter it via causal or explanatory relationships. We can expect our sub-algebra to be closed under causal and explanatory connections. And we can expect our sub-algebra to be properly integrated with those things that causally effect us, for example in perception. Such a sub-algebra would be a very stable resting point for a representational system. There is little need to develop it further, even if it only captures a small part of what there is to represent. On the other hand, if a representational system does not form a closed structure, or at least something reasonably close to it, then we would expect it to develop further if it develops at all. But once it is reasonably closed it rests at a stable place. The sub-algebra hypothesis explains why the ineffable is systematically hidden from us even if the ineffability thesis is true. It accommodates what needs to be accommodated, and we have good reason to think it holds. The question remains, however, what follows from it?

4.3 Ineffability and modesty

The sub-algebra hypothesis makes clear in what sense the ineffable matters, and in what sense it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter locally, i.e. for particular questions of fact that aren't concerned with reality as a whole. If I ask an ordinary question like why is there a sandwich on the table, who ate my apple, or why is the sky blue, then I should expect that I can state the answer. Causal and explanatory relationships are part of my representational system, and thus are what my algebra is closed under. For ordinary local questions the ineffable will fall out of the picture.[15]

But not so for global questions about all of reality. Here, too, our reasonable question–answer completeness will likely allow us to state the answer if we can state the question. But the ineffable and how it is hidden from us will often mislead us into accepting the wrong answer. This is worrisome for questions about materialism and naturalism in particular. From our point of view it can seem perfectly compelling that everything is material and all there is fits into the natural world. So the questions "Is everything material?" and "Is the natural world all there is?" are questions we can state, and whose answers (yes or no) we can state as well. But our representational limitations might lead us to accept the wrong answers. If

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[15] Quantified claims, when relevant to local issues, should be taken to be restricted to the locally relevant domain, and thus they won't range over all of reality, in contrast to those that are explicitly intended to be unrestricted, like the ones that are intended to make claims about all of reality.

the sub-algebra hypothesis is correct then we might be in the materialist/ naturalist sub-algebra in a largely non-naturalist world. If this is our situation we would naturally, but in this case incorrectly, hold that materialism or naturalism is true. Just as the integers would find it compelling to think that all there is are integers, even when there are infinitely many other numbers before we get to the next integer. We might similarly find naturalism compelling even though the non-natural is infinitely close to us, and all around us, but systematically hidden from us. The ineffable is locally irrelevant, but globally central. And it is, in particular, central for the large-scale metaphysical questions about all of reality.

The sub-algebra hypothesis is not a skeptical hypothesis, in the sense that it is not a scenario that we can't rule out to obtain, and which invalidates our entitlement to our ordinary beliefs. On the contrary, it is a scenario that we have reason to believe obtains, but on this scenario our ordinary beliefs are taken to be true. The parts of reality that we can represent we do represent correctly, or so we can grant here. But when we want to make claims about all of reality then we reach a limit. The sub-algebra hypothesis does not warrant a rejection of trying to answer large-scale metaphysical questions about reality, but it does warrant a form of modesty. We must recognize that our situation is one where these questions are to be approached with a sense that whatever answer seems compelling to us might simply reflect our own limitations, but not how reality actually is. The ineffability thesis combined with the sub-algebra hypothesis in particular suggests modesty about global metaphysical questions. Modesty is not agnosticism or quietism, but it is a step in that general direction.[16] It does not justify the abandonment of grand metaphysical theorizing, but it does justify that such theorizing is different in its epistemic status from other parts of inquiry. How different it is will depend on how strong the reasons are that we have for the ineffability thesis and the sub-algebra hypothesis. It will be a difference in degree, and to what degree is not clear so far. Modesty for grand metaphysics follows, to what degree is left open.

The argument for modesty given here is importantly different from the argument that we should be modest about judging how many people are in this room, since after all there might be lots of invisible and otherwise undetectable people all around us. We have no reason to think that there are invisible people around us; that is just a hypothesis we might not be able to rule out. But we do have reason to think that there are ineffable facts, and that these facts are systematically hidden from us. These reasons are not

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[16] Modesty thus contrasts with the positions taken by Gideon Rosen (1994) and Sven Rosenkranz (2007).

conclusive, of course, but they are good reasons nonetheless. Thus reflecting on our own situation should lead us to conclude that there is a reasonable expectation that we fall short of complete effability. We have reason to believe that what we can represent is less than what is the case. We also have reason to believe that the ineffable is systematically hidden from us and that the sub-algebra hypothesis is correct. Thus we can expect to be misled in our judgments about global features of reality, and so modesty in grand meta-physics is advisable, and the ambitions of metaphysics need to be toned down. At the same time we should expect the ineffable to be locally irrelevant. The consequence of all this is modesty for metaphysics, but it is insignificant for most of the rest.

This would be a natural place to end the chapter, but I am afraid it is only half of the story. Although most philosophers hold views that should make all the above arguments compelling to them, there is an assumption in the background of our discussion so far that is worth making explicit and that might well be false. I have to confess that I have argued elsewhere that it is false.[17] If it is indeed false then everything changes for our discussion, or so I hope to make clear in the following part of the paper. If the assumption is false then it naturally leads to a defense of the effability thesis and its natural companion: idealism. To make this assumption explicit and to argue that everything depends on it will hopefully justify going on for a bit longer.

5. INTERNALISM, EFFABILITY, AND IDEALISM

Our starting point was to wonder about the relationship between two different things: which facts obtain on the one hand, and which facts we can represent in thought or language on the other. The general relationship between these two was illustrated with the Venn diagram in section 2. Here the idea was that on the one side is reality, and on the other side are we, with our attempts to represent reality. The notion of reality can be made more precise, as usual, in two ways: the totality of what there is, or the totality of what is the case. On the latter conception it is simply the totality of all the facts that obtain. Reality, understood as all that is the case, is taken to be simply there, waiting for us to represent some of it in thought or language. The totality of facts forms an independent domain: a domain of all truths, facts, or true propositions. Reality, on this broadly propositional conception of it, just as reality on the broadly ontological conception as the totality of what there is, is simply there, independently of us, with no special place for

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[17] See Hofweber (2006) (2009), and, in particular (2016b).

us in what it in general is like. But this general picture of the relationship between the totality of facts and us might be false. Although this picture is widely accepted, we in fact have good reason to think that it is mistaken. In the final parts of this paper we will look more at this standard picture of the propositional, what its alternative is, and how the issue about which one is right relates to the question about the ineffable. But first, let's get clearer on the standard picture of the propositional and its alternative.

5.1 Talk about propositions: that-clauses

When we talk about propositions or facts we do so most directly with a that-clause, for example in the ascription of content to an utterance or representation:

(3)   A said that *p*.

The most common way to understand such sentences is to take them to involve two semantically singular terms, that is two phrases that aim to pick out, refer to, or denote some thing or entity.[18] In the case of (3), one term that stands for a person: "A"; and another term that stands for a proposition: "that p". Although the term that picks out the proposition is different in kind from the term that picks out the person both in effect do the same thing, standing for some thing or entity. And on the common way of fleshing out this picture, reality contains not just a domain of persons, it also contains a domain of propositions. When A says that *p* then some relation, the saying relation, holds between two things: a sayer and a proposition. On this picture it is natural to think of the domain of propositions in analogy with the domain of persons. It is something that is part of reality, something that is simply there, waiting to be picked out with our that-clauses.[19]

But there is an alternative way of looking at this. It is partly motivated by the fact that that-clauses are first and foremost clauses. As (complement) clauses that-clauses are of the same general category as "where I hoped it was" or "whether she ate it," and the like. Such clauses are not naturally taken to be terms that pick out things or entities. They seem to have a different semantic function. It is tempting to hold that that-clauses in examples like (3) specify

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[18] Although it can be argued that we should recognize a difference between referring, denoting, and picking out, I will gloss over such differences in the following, since it won't matter which one of them that-clauses do, only whether they do any of them.

[19] A rare exception of this picture of propositions to be there, but not be language independent is Stephen Schiffer's (2003) view. Almost all other authors who believe in a domain of propositions take them to be there independently of us. Whether Schiffer's view makes a difference to our debate here is discussed among other issues in Hofweber (2016a), where I hold that on a natural reading it does not, although an alternative might be possible.

what was said, but don't refer to some object which was said. They do not refer to a content, but say what the content is. On such a non-referential picture of the function of that-clauses, "said" does not express a relation between two things, one denoted by "A" and the other denoted by "that p." Instead, "said" predicates of one thing, A, that it said that *p*. Complement clauses on such a picture have a quite different function than names for objects.

Which one of these two positions is correct should be seen at least as an open question in semantics, one that is widely debated in the present literature.[20] Whichever side comes out on top in this debate, it will have significant consequences for our discussion of the ineffable, or so I will argue now. These two pictures of the semantic function of that-clauses corres-pond, on their natural development, to two different pictures of the prop-ositional, and correspondingly two different answers to the question about what is effable. To see that we first need to say more about how the second, non-referential, picture of that-clauses is naturally developed in more detail.

The non-referential view of that-clauses might intuitively be very plaus-ible, but it faces a serious obstacle when it comes to making sense of quite obviously valid inferences like the inference from (3) to

(4)   A said something.

How can a believer in that-clauses being non-referring or non-denoting expressions account for the validity of this inference? If A said something then it seems that there must be some thing or entity to which A bears the saying relation. Whatever the believer in non-referential and non-denoting clause wants to say here, it has to make sense of such inferences. But as it turns out, similar inferences are also possible in cases that have nothing to do with clauses and also involve apparently non-referential complements. For example,

(5)   I need an assistant.[21]

implies that

(6)   I need something.

even when I don't need any particular person to be my assistant, just some assistant or other. Similarly,

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(7) My daughter wants a unicorn.

(which is true) implies that

(8) She wants something.

Even though she doesn't want a particular unicorn, she would be happy with any one, and even though there are no unicorns at all. What all this suggests is that there is more going on with quantifiers than the simple objection to the non-referential picture of that-clauses suggests.

5.2 Talk about propositions: quantifiers

Some story about quantification must make sense of all this, and my favorite one is the following.[22] Quantifiers are semantically underspecified. They are polysemous expressions that have at least two different readings. These readings arise from two different functions they have in ordinary communication. One is to make a claim about the domain of objects, or entities. On this use of quantifiers we say that among all the things there are, whichever they might be, one of them has a certain feature (in the case of a use of the particular quantifier). This we will call the domain conditions, or external, reading, since it makes a claim about the domain of entities, which is something language external. On the other reading they are supposed to inferentially relate to other expressions in ones own language. This we will call the inferential, or internal, reading. On this reading the quantifier has a certain inferential role. In the case of the particular quantifier, it simply is the inferential role

(9) $F(t)/F(\text{something})$

whereby "t" could be any expression of a limited range of syntactic categories, be it a singular term, or a clause, or some other complement.[23] On the inferential reading of "something" the quantifier has this inferential role and thus inferentially relates some sentences to others internal to the language. To illustrate the difference, consider an example that uses the universal quantifier "everything":

(10) Everything exists.

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[22] See Hofweber (2000) and (2005), and, in particular, Chapter 3 of Hofweber (2016b).

[23] Which precise range of cases belong to this group is not completely clear. Quantifiers in natural language do not interact with just any syntactic category. For example, we can't quantify into determiner position, and we will simply accept this limitation here without hoping to explain it.

On the polysemy account outlined above this sentence has two readings. On one it should have a ring of truth, on the other it is quite clearly false. The true reading is the external one, where you are saying that all the things in the domain have in common that they all exist. And that, leaving some philosophical views to the contrary aside, seems true. But on the inferential reading it is quite clearly false. On this reading the sentence has the inferential role

(11)   F(everything)/F(t)

where "t" can be any instance in my language. So (10) implies Santa exists, the Easter Bunny exists, etc. which are false. Since it implies false things it must be false itself. So, on the inferential reading, (10) is false.

To say that quantifiers have an inferential reading is not to accept an inferentialist semantics in general. An inferential role can be the result of a contribution to the truth conditions. The question remains so far what contribution to the truth conditions gives quantifiers their inferential roles on the internal reading. One thing is clear: the truth conditions on the inferential reading have to be different than the truth conditions on the domain conditions reading. On the inferential reading the inference goes through no matter what the semantic function of the relevant instances is. What truth conditions would give it that inferential role? There is a simple answer to this question. The simplest truth conditions that give the particular quantifier the inferential role for which we want it is for sentences in which it occurs to be equivalent to the disjunction of all the instances that are supposed to imply it. These truth conditions are simplest in the sense that any other candidate truth conditions that give the particular quantifier that inferential role must be weaker: the simplest one would imply them. Similarly, the simplest truth condition that gives the universal quantifier its inferential role is the conjunction over all the instances that it is supposed to imply, which is for us all the instances in our language. Any other candidate truth conditions that have that inferential role would have to be stronger in that it would itself have to imply that conjunction. When it comes to the truth conditions that the quantified sentences have when the quantifiers are used in their inferential role reading we have an optimal solution, and we thus have some reason to think that quantifiers in that reading make that contribution to the truth conditions.[24] As we will see shortly, this leaves one important complication aside, one we will need to address in the following section. So far we have only given the simple version of the semantics of the inferential reading of

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[24] The details of this approach to quantification, including how it can be extended to generalized quantifiers, are spelled out in Chapter 3 of Hofweber (2016b). How it relates to and is different from substitutional quantification is also discussed there.

quantifiers. As we will see later, a proper version can be given as well, but let's work with the simple one for now. Whether this is the correct understanding of quantification, in particular when related to quantification over propositions, is one question, but it should be clear that this is one natural way in which the non-referential picture of that-clauses might extend to quantification as well. We will not try to settle whether this picture is indeed correct, but instead focus on what it implies for our discussion of the ineffable.

5.3 Internalism vs. externalism

To understand talk about propositions involves at least making progress on the question whether or not that-clauses are referring or denoting expressions, and how to understand quantification into that-clause position. There are two large-scale options about how such talk can be understood in a coherent way, which in effect depend on what one thinks about that-clauses and quantification into that-clause position. If that-clauses pick out things then quantification into that-clause position should be quantification over the domain of these things. If that-clauses don't pick out entities then quantification into that-clause position should be understood along different lines. Here, I suggested, the best option is to understand it as being based on the inferential reading of quantifiers, a reading quantifiers have in general. These two large-scale views are thus:

(12)　a. **Internalism:** that-clauses are non-denoting, quantifiers into that-clause position are used in their internal, inferential, reading.

(12)　b. **Externalism:** that-clauses are denoting, quantifiers into that-clause position are used in their external, domain conditions, reading.

Externalism is naturally connected to an ontology of propositions. If our talk about the propositional is not completely in error then the domain over which we quantify must be non-empty, and thus propositions exist. But if internalism is correct then there is no such domain of propositions, and in particular no propositions exist. I take propositions, if there are any, here simply to be whatever that-clauses refer to or pick out. They are what we talk about when we say that Fred believes that p or Sue said that p. If there are such things as propositions then they are the things that we talk about when we ascribe content. But on the internalist picture we do not talk about any things when we ascribe content since our that-clauses don't pick out any such things. They are non-referring and non-denoting expressions. And if propositions just are whatever we talk about when we ascribe content then it follows from the internalist picture of such talk that no such things exist.[25] If "that p" as well as

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[25]　More on all this is in Chapter 4 of Hofweber (2016b).

"the proposition that p" does not refer to anything then whatever there might be, none of it is the proposition that *p*. The internalist picture of talk about propositions guarantees that there are no propositions, so understood. This will be relevant later. Whether internalism or externalism is correct is a question in the philosophy of language that we can't hope to settle here. What we can hope to see is that this question is crucial for our debate about the ineffable.

5.4 Internalism and the effability thesis

Everyone should believe that there is a substantial issue about how we should understand our talk about the propositional, no matter which side one eventually ends up on. Suppose, though, that internalism turns out to be correct. Then quantification over[26] propositions generalizes over the instances, in my own language. After all, the inferential role I am concerned with is the inferential behavior that quantifiers have in my language, and to have that inferential role it needs, on the simplest solution, to be equivalent to the conjunction or disjunction over all the instances. Thus

(13) I need something

on the internal reading is equivalent to the disjunction

(14) $\vee$ (I need F)

whereby F can be any of the variety of instances of the sentence: an assistant, a unicorn, etc. The quantified sentence, on its internal reading, is thus equivalent to a disjunction over all the instances in our own language. This disjunction is infinite, but it is a disjunction of instances nonetheless.

The effability thesis was the thesis that

(1) Everything is effable.

And as we noted above, the relevant way to understand it is that all true propositions, or truths, are effable, but not necessarily all feelings, objects, etc. The quantifier "everything" in the statement of the effability thesis is thus a quantifier over propositions. Assuming the truth of internalism, it is thus used in its inferential, internal reading. Internal quantifiers have the simplest truth conditions that give them the inferential role, and so the effability thesis is equivalent to the conjunction of all the instances in my own language. Thus, assuming internalism, it is equivalent to the following conjunction:

[26] I take "talk about propositions" and "quantification over propositions" to have a sense in which they are neutral between the two options, and I mean it in this neutral sense here. That there is such a neutral sense is clear using a topical sense of aboutness, the sense in which you can talk about aliens all night long, whether or not there are any.

(15) $\bigwedge$ (that *p* is effable).

Here we have a conjunct for every instance of "p" in our own language. But for each such instance the sentence "that *p* is effable" is true, since we can eff all the instances in our own language. Thus on the internalist understanding of talk about propositions the effability thesis is true. When we say that everything is effable we are generalizing over the instances in our own language. And if this is so then the effability thesis is true.

    This answer to the question whether or not any aspect of reality is ineffable might seem very unsatisfactory and more like a cheap trick. We will discuss whether this answer could possibly be correct shortly. Before that, though, we need to see a bit more about how the internalist picture deals with the arguments against the effability thesis. And to see this we first have to formulate it properly.

5.5 The proper formulation of internalism

The formulation of internalism given above was too simple, in a way that will matter for us later on for larger questions about the relationship between what there is and what is the case, and for dealing with the arguments for ineffable facts. But that it was too simple can be seen quite directly without having these issues in mind. To formulate internalism properly we need to make sure that the quantifiers properly interact with all the instances, not just the simplest ones we have considered so far. All the instances include cases like "he ate the cookies" and "it is pink." From

(16)   John said that it is pink

it follows that

(17)   John said something.

But on the account given so far this inference might not be valid. So far we have not considered how to deal with an instance of a quantifier that contains context sensitive elements. Implicitly at least, we have simply ignored them, and ignoring them gives a well-defined semantics for the quantifiers: the instances are simply all sentences that have truth conditions independently of the context in which they are uttered. We could call these *eternal sentences*.[27] But simply having disjunctions or conjunctions of eternal

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[27]   There is a substantial further issue about such sentences, and which ones have that feature. Many sentences involve contributions from context or speakers intentions besides filling in values of demonstratives. I will largely put these aside here. For other ways in which context can affect content the question will be if there is also a way to express the

sentences is not enough, since in "it is pink" the "it" might pick out something that is not picked out by any eternal term, and thus no eternal sentences would be equivalent to "it is pink." How internalism is to be formulated to overcome this issue is discussed in detail in Hofweber (2006), but the main idea is simple enough. The inference from (16) to (17) has to be valid no matter what object might be referred to with "it." Thus for any object o we need a disjunct that is true just in case o is pink. And this we can do by simply adding external quantification over objects on the outside of our disjunction, and allow new variables to be bound by this quantifier in these disjunctions. In our case this would give us the truth conditions of (17) not as

(18) ∨ (John said that p)

but as

(19) $\exists \bar{x} \vee$ (John said that $p[\bar{x}]$).

Here "$p[\bar{x}]$" means that any of the new variables $\bar{x}$ may occur in the instances that replace "p." And since we can't in advance give an upper bound on how many such variables there might be (after all, John might have said that it is taller than that, but shorter than this, etc.) we must allow for infinitely many. Thus the truth conditions of internalist quantifiers over propositions are not merely given by infinitary conjunctions and disjunctions, but involve infinitary quantification as well. All this is at least technically unproblematic.[28] In case of universal quantification the external quantifier over objects out front of the big conjunction is, of course, a universal external quantifier.[29]

With this new formulation we can now see that the effability thesis

(1)   Everything is effable

is not simply equivalent to

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same content without the effects of context. Since our instances are all instances in our language, we would avoid this issue if we could always find a context insensitive way to express a content that otherwise was expressed in a context sensitive way. This is certainly possible for most contributions of context, like disambiguation, various enrichments, etc. If it is always possible for cases other than demonstratives, it will be left as an open question for now.

[28] In effect, internal quantification over propositions increases the expressive power of a language to a small fragment of what is called $L\omega_1, \omega_1$ built on top of that language. More about this is in Hofweber (2006). Infinitary extensions of first order logic are discussed, for example, in Keisler (1971).

[29] How to do this for generalized quantifiers is developed in the appendices to Chapters 3 and 10 of Hofweber (2016b).

(20) $\bigwedge$ (that p is effable)

but instead to

(21) $\forall \bar{x} \bigwedge$ (that $p[\bar{x}]$ is effable).

And (21) is now not necessarily true any more with just any notion of
effability. If what is effable is understood as what is effable by us in the
circumstances we are actually in then this can be false, for example if there
are objects outside of our light cone that we are thus not able to refer to (to
use an example and assumption discussed above). But (21) is true if we use
the object-permitting notion of effability, as discussed in section 3.5. On
this, object-permitting, notion of effability, missing objects are never a
source of ineffability. It is the notion of the ineffable that passes the
incommunicability test, where reference to objects is always assumed to be
possible and not a relevant source of a limitation. In our case (21), every
instance of the quantifier is in effect equivalent to some sentence
$p(a_1, a_2, \ldots, a_n)$ where a_i is some parameter standing for an object, and p
is some sentence in our language. On the object-permitting notion of
effability, every one of these instances is effable.

   Thus the proper formulation of internalism guarantees the truth of the
effability thesis using the object-permitting notion of effability. And the
extra resources that are needed to give the proper formulation of internalism
are the ones that explain why the ineffability thesis nonetheless seems true to
us, as we will see now.

5.6 Explaining apparent ineffability

If internalism is true, and with it the effability thesis, what then becomes of
our arguments for ineffability? After all, we found them quite compelling
above. But maybe all these arguments implicitly relied on a standard,
externalist picture of propositions and facts? We considered four arguments
for ineffability: built-in limitations, the argument from analogy, cardinality
arguments, and there being no explanation why the effability thesis would
be true. Let's revisit them now.

   What could explain that a mind like ours can represent everything there is
to represent? The internalist has a simple answer: "everything" here gener-
alizes over our instances. No wonder we can represent everything, since we
can represent every one of our instances: every instance in our language of
"that p." And relying on an object-permitting notion of effability we can eff
every instance with parameters. It is no accident and no mystery that we can
represent everything there is to represent. Internalism maintains that it is

based on a mistake to wonder here why two separate things coincide: the propositional and our representational abilities. Instead the propositional and our representational abilities are not two unconnected things, if internalism is true. The truth of the effability thesis falls out of how talk about propositions is to be understood. It would be hard to explain why the effability thesis is true on an externalist picture, but it is quite straightforward on an internalist one.

What about our built-in imitations? Maybe our mind must think a certain way, maybe we are inflexible and fixed in how we have to think, due to how our mind evolved or how our brain is structured. This naturally supports that we are limited in what we can represent on an externalist conception of facts. If facts are simply there, as part of an independent domain, then we should expect a mismatch. But on the internalist conception there is no such domain. So even our lack of flexibility does not support ineffability, since it does not support that this lack of flexibility is a limitation. We can explain why the effability thesis holds even if our minds have a fixed setup.

The cardinality arguments are directly answered by the extra resources that we get from the proper formulation of internalism. Consider again the argument that there are more propositions than we can eff, since there are only countably many sentences in our language, but there are uncountably many facts about real numbers. The following is true:

(22)   For every real number *r* there is a fact which is the fact that *r* is a real number.

This truth seems to be incompatible with the effability thesis as well as with internalism, since for different real numbers we get different facts, and thus overall too many facts for the effability thesis to hold. However, on the proper formulation of internalist quantification over propositions, (22) is true, and thus the truth of (22) is compatible with internalism. Here, crucially, the external quantifier over real numbers interacts with the external quantifiers that bind the new variables discussed above. Thus on the proper formulation of internalism (22) would look like this:

(23) $\forall r \exists \bar{x} \lor$ (that $p[\bar{x}]$ is the fact that *r* is a real number).

This is true when "p" is instantiated with "x_i is a real number," where "x_i" is bound from the outside with an external quantifier that ranges, amongst others, over real numbers, and thus has the relevant *r* as an instance. (22) appears to be in conflict with internalism, but in fact it is only in conflict with internalism on its naive formulation, but not with internalism on its proper formulation.

To put it differently: the proper notion of an ineffable fact is one that is ineffable on an object-permitting notion of effability. Cardinality arguments

like our simple argument using the real numbers argue that there is a certain cardinality of facts since there are collections of objects (the real numbers) of this cardinality. Furthermore, the argument continues, that cardinality is larger than the cardinality of effable facts and thus most are ineffable. But on the object-permitting notion of the ineffable, more objects get us more effable facts. On that notion of the ineffable it is hopeless to try to show that there more facts than effable facts, since there are lots of objects involved in all the facts. Such cardinality arguments thus won't get off the ground.[30]

Finally, let's consider the argument from analogy, which is maybe the most compelling and forceful argument for ineffability. Here the internalist answer is clear: although it appears to be coherent to imagine aliens or gods who relate to us like we relate to the honeybee, there in fact can be no such creatures. There can be no creatures who can represent more facts than we can, since we can already represent all the facts. We can represent everything there is to represent, while the honeybee can not. Since we can already represent everything, there can be no creatures who can represent more. There can be more powerful creatures with better spaceships, but they cannot represent any more facts. But whether this answer is at all satisfactory, or merely an endorsement of an absurd consequence of a view, can't really be appreciated without looking more generally at the internalist picture of the propositional. Internalism is not merely a view about the semantics of that-clauses and quantifiers, but it incorporates a completely different picture of the propositional and of reality understood as the totality of facts. And only with that picture clearer in view can we see that this answer is not in fact absurd. Although an externalist will take it to be extreme bullet-biting, the internalist will take it to be a deep insight into the nature of the propositional or fact-like aspect of reality. We can only assess who has the upper hand once the full picture is on the table, to which we must turn now.

5.7 The internalist picture of the propositional

On the externalist picture of the propositional, propositions form a domain of entities that we can refer to, and that our quantifiers range over when we quantify over propositions. Propositions on this view are most naturally understood as simply being there, as part of reality in addition to regular objects, waiting for us to refer to them.[31] Facts can be seen as either being identical to or at least corresponding to true propositions, and so what holds

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[30] How internalism can deal with these and various other cardinality arguments is discussed in more detail in Hofweber (2006).

[31] Again, an exception to this picture is Schiffer (2003).

for propositions will hold for facts as well. Facts, propositions, states of affairs, anything we would pick out with a that-clause, we can call *the propositional*. On the externalist picture, the propositional is simply there, a part of reality, ready for us to discover and refer to. If facts are entities then reality as all there is determines reality as all that is the case. Under this assumption we should expect, as we saw above, that not all facts or propositions can be represented by us, and some will remain in principle ineffable. Taking propositions to form a domain that is simply there, as a part of reality, naturally leads to accepting ineffable facts as well as the sub-algebra hypothesis as the best explanation of why the ineffable is so well hidden.

But the internalist account of talk about propositions is not just a semantic view of talk about propositions, it embodies a completely different picture of the propositional. On this picture the propositional is not simply there, and it is not independent of us, in a sense to be worked out. This difference is crucial when it comes to understanding why the effability thesis holds, assuming internalism, and how the arguments against effability are to be answered. In this and the next section I hope to work out more clearly what the internalist picture of the propositional is and how to understand it not being independent of us. And to do this we first should contrast the internalist picture with what it is not.

The internalist does not simply establish the effability thesis with a semantic trick. Consider, as a contrast, a person who holds that they own everything. They say that the correct semantics of "everything" is that it ranges only over their things, and thus they own everything, since they own all their things. This is a bad view on several grounds, not the least of which is, of course, that this is not the correct semantics of "everything." But the crucial difference between this view and the internalist view of talk about propositions goes beyond that. On the internalist view it is not true that when we say that we can represent everything we say that we can represent everything that is in some sense ours. We do not restrict our quantifier to some subset of the propositions which are related to us, analogous to the universal owner who restricts their quantifiers to the subset of things that they own. Internalism does not restrict the quantifier, but instead embodies a different view of what such quantifiers do, which is tied to a different view of what singular ascriptions of content do. Such quantifiers are unrestricted inferential quantifiers. As such their truth conditions give them a certain inferential role in our language, and the simplest truth conditions that do this are the ones that are equivalent to generalizations over all the instances. That these instances are instances in our language, and thus ones we can represent, is not the result of some sort of a restriction, but simply a consequence of the simplest truth conditions that give us what we need. Talk about propositions or facts, on the internalist picture, is not talk about

some independent domain, it is not talk about any entities at all. On the internalist picture, that-clauses do not refer. They do not aim to pick out any entities. So talk about propositions is very different than talk about objects.

Still, the internalist defense of the effablity thesis might seem unsatisfactory. It seems to involve too much language and not enough metaphysics and thus can't be a defense of the view that all of *reality* is effable by us. Reality played little role in this defense. But that doesn't mean that the defense was defective. The internalist's explanation of why the effability thesis is true relied on the connection between the quantifier "everything" that occurred in the statement of the effability thesis and the instances of such quantified sentences in our own language. That this was enough to see that the effability thesis is true is surprising, but that doesn't make it incorrect. That the explanation has to rely on reality in addition to what we do when we talk about all facts or truths is true on an externalist picture of the propositional, but not on an internalist one. For the latter, reflection on our language is enough. We can see that once we talk about the propositional at all, in the internalist way, the truth of the effability thesis follows. This is surprising, but it might just be true if internalism is indeed true.

It is tempting to say that on the internalist picture the propositional is not an independent part of reality, but somehow due to us. But this on the face of it doesn't make sense. Which facts obtain is, of course, not in general due to us. But there is something right about this, although it's hard to put one's finger on what precisely it is. I will make a more precise proposal about this in the next section, but first we should see some more if all this is too shallow a victory for the effability thesis.

Let's assume for the moment that internalism is true, and thus the effability thesis, as stated, is true as well. What this might be taken to show is that we need to state the question we wanted to ask differently than we did. As formulated the question has a negative answer, but maybe we need to reformulate it so that it is more substantial, more about reality, and less about language. After all, the question we intended to ask was not supposed to be settled by the semantics of quantifiers and the non-referentiality of that-clauses. Of course, we can't demand that the questions we ask are answered the way we expect or intend them to be answered, but still, maybe the lesson we should draw from all this is that we need to state the question we wanted to ask differently. Maybe internalism wins a shallow victory when it comes to the letter of the effability thesis, but it only pushes the real issue somewhere else.

This line of thought is indeed tempting, but in the end it is mistaken. The truth and recognition of internalism does not motivate that we should ask the question differently. In fact, there is no better way of asking it. Instead

internalism shows us the answer to the question we wanted to ask in the first place. To see this, let's consider some attempts to ask the question differently, assuming internalism is true, and why they won't help.

Assuming again internalism, it won't do to ask about the effability of every fact, or every proposition, or every proposition-like thing. Internal quantifiers over those make clear that the answer is in line with the effability thesis. So, maybe we should state the question in a way where we quantify over something else, something where internalism is not true: sentences, or inscriptions, or thought tokens, or something along those lines. These are simply material objects (we can assume) and so internalism doesn't apply to talk about them (we can also assume). Should we thus ask instead whether there is some (actual or possible) concrete inscription which can't be translated into our language, or some thought token which has a different content than any such token we can in principle have? But this won't help. If internalism is true then we can conclude that there can be no such thought token or inscription. If such a token has a content at all then it has a content which we can think as well. Anything else has no content. Thus if there are inscriptions, sentences or tokens which we can't translate it is not because they have a content that is beyond us, but rather because they have no content at all. And there certainly is no failure of translation if you fail to be able to translate something devoid of content. This way of trying to restate the question won't change the issue.

Another attempt could go via truth. Maybe the aliens can say things truly which we can't say at all? Maybe true things accessible to them go beyond the truths accessible to us? But this, too, won't help. There is a bridge-principle that connects things that are true to contents:

(24)   x is true if and only if x has a true content.

It is hard to see, maybe inconceivable, how anything could be true, but not have any content. With this connection, moving the issue to truth doesn't change things.

Finally, one might try to throw in the towel on truth, content, and propositions, and acknowledge that we are not limited when it comes to those, but that there is a limitation nonetheless, but we can't even properly articulate our limitations. To illustrate with the advanced aliens again, the idea is that although they are not doing better than we when it comes to truth and content, they are doing better when it comes to truth* or schmuth and content* or schmontent. When the aliens look down at us from their advanced spaceships, they will certainly take us to be limited, and maybe we can't quite say how, but they might think of us as missing out on some important truths* or contents*. Now, this is certainly right in many ways, but is wrong in the crucial way that matters here. We are clearly limited

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when it comes to the aliens—we don't have the spaceships, and their invasion of earth might be a walk in the park for them. But the crucial issue for us is whether we are limited in what we can represent conceptually. And here the thought experiment motivates no such thing. Truth*, whatever it is supposed to be, isn't truth, and content* isn't content. Whichever of our many limitations we consider they are not limitations in what we can in principle represent conceptually. If internalism is true then we can reason conclusively that every fact can in principle be represented conceptually by us, although other things can't be conceptually represented by us, but these are not the kinds of things that conceptual representation is supposed to represent in the first place. Conceptual representation is complete in its domain, and this indicates that there is no proper separation between what is to be represented conceptually and the representations that do the representing.[32]

Let us now return to the argument from analogy, which was somewhat postponed in its assessment above. When the aliens look down at us like we look down at the honeybee then we are correct in thinking that they are superior to us in many ways, but incorrect in thinking that they can represent more facts than we do. When they think about us as these primitive creatures, we cannot truly report their thoughts that the primitive humans don't get all the facts. That simply isn't true, assuming internalism, of course. We might not be as good as the aliens in all kinds of things, but when it comes to representing the facts we are.

There is no question that there is the strong sense that there is a limitation of us that is analogous to the limitation of the honeybee. It might be hard to state what that limitation is supposed to be more precisely, but there clearly is the sense of a limitation motivated by analogy. However, assuming

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[32] The conclusion here is similar to one drawn by Donald Davidson (1984). However, it is reached in quite different ways. Davidson held that due to his particular theory of meaning it was impossible for there to be a language that is in principle untranslatable into our language, and thus that there could not be variation like this across conceptual schemes, and thus the notion of a conceptual scheme is based on a mistake. The present view holds that there could not be content that goes beyond what we can say in principle, not because of a theory of meaning, but because of what we do when we talk about propositions. A second similarity is to Hilary Putnam's (1981) argument that we are not brains in vats, since the question whether we are, as stated by us, is guaranteed to have a negative answer. Internalism is not tied to skepticism, but the fact that the focus on the question can be a key to its answer is similar in both Putnam's argument as well as here. It should be noted that the internalist picture of the propositional is quite different from McDowell's view on the matter. McDowell explicitly contrasts his view with an "arrogant anthropomorphism" (1994, 39) which holds that we can represent all facts with our present conceptual resources. In contrast he holds that what there is to represent about reality is not influenced by our conceptual resources, but an independent fact about it. See section 8 of Lecture 2 in McDowell (1994) which is devoted to this issue.

internalism, we can reason conclusively that there is no relevant limitation. We will have to weigh the sense of a limitation against the reasons against a limitation. Since reasons make things more reasonable than merely feeling a limitation, it is thus reasonable to conclude that the sense is misguided and the argument from analogy, although powerful, is in the end mistaken.

We can thus conclude, assuming internalism about our own talk about propositions, that there is nothing the aliens can truly say that we can't say in principle as well. When it comes to conceptual representation we face no limitation, and this is a consequence of what the propositional aspect of reality is like. Internalism does not give us reason to think we are limited, but it gives us a different picture of the propositional. The propositional is not part of reality in the sense that there is no domain of propositions or facts of which we might capture more or fewer. Instead, it reflects our employment of talk about propositions, and it doesn't and can't go beyond that. The propositional is a reflection of our talk about propositions. This might sound like a version of idealism, and it is.

5.8 Idealism vindicated

Idealism sounds bad, but it doesn't have to be when properly stated. Idealism broadly understood holds that, in some form or other, minds, in particular minds of creatures like us, are central to reality. The most common and maybe most natural way to be an idealist is to hold that what reality is like depends on our minds. And this is naturally spelled out as ontological idealism: the view that what there is depends on our minds in some way. Many of the historically significant idealists were idealists of this sort, but it is rather problematic and rightly widely rejected. It is not clear how the notion of dependence is supposed to be understood such that idealism so formulated is compatible with other things we know to be true. We know that the universe existed before there were any humans and we know roughly what it was like before we were around. It is not clear how this is compatible with what there is depending on us, on a natural understanding of dependence. In particular, it is not clear how to even state the idealist position without it leading immediately to conflict with many other things we know. Ontological idealism is false, but idealism might still be true.[33]

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[33] A weaker form of idealism is to hold that even though what there is does not depend on us, nonetheless, there being minds like ours is no accident. Any world must contain some minds, and without minds there could be no material world at all. A version of this position was defended by Anton Friedrich Koch with an intriguing argument in (1990) and (2010). I don't believe that his argument works, and have tried to say why not in

An alternative way of thinking about idealism is to tie it not to ontology but rather to the conceptual or propositional aspect of reality. Although what there is is independent of us, the fact-like or propositional aspect of reality is not. That is, reality, understood as what there is, is independent of us, but reality, understood as what is the case, is not. This way of understanding idealism faces the same problems at first as ontological idealism. How can we coherently state a notion of dependence for the propositional that doesn't immediately conflict with what we know to be the case? Here we have to distinguish two ways in which the propositional could be dependent on us. The propositional is *truth-dependent* on us just in case which propositions are true is dependent on us. In this sense it is, of course, false that the propositional depends on us. Which truths are true is not something that in general depends on us. We can make some propositions true or false by affecting the world, but we don't make the true propositions true in general. Alternatively, the propositional is *range-dependent* on us just in case the extent of the propositional is dependent on us, which is to say, what propositions there are as candidates for being true depends on us, somehow and in some sense. The natural way to understand this is that what can be represented conceptually in principle is, somehow, dependent on us and our conceptual resources. And a natural way to understand that is that it is guaranteed that all there is to represent about reality can be represented by us, in principle. And this in turn means that the effability thesis is true for a reason connected to us. The view that this is so was called *conceptual idealism* in section 3.4. And this is the form of idealism that might be true.

Conceptual idealism is thus the view that the propositional is range-dependent on us. It is a form of idealism, but different from and independent of ontological idealism.[34] As discussed briefly above, the standard route to conceptual idealism, and with it the standard defense of the effability thesis, is via ontological idealism. But conceptual idealism might be true even if ontological idealism is false, and internalism about talk about propositions and facts supports just that option. If internalism is true then the propositional depends on us, not for its truth, but for its range. Internalism thus supports idealism, not ontological idealism, of course, but conceptual idealism.

Conceptual idealism avoids the incompatibility worries that ontological idealism faces rather directly. It is a promising candidate to provide a coherent

[34] In Chapter VI of Nagel (1986), Thomas Nagel takes something like conceptual idealism to be the defining mark of idealism. This is slightly unusual, but I believe with Nagel that the real issue about idealism is just that. Nagel, of course, rejects idealism so understood.

formulation of idealism. Although the idealist might be tempted to try to say more about how the world depends on us, it is not clear how we can do this coherently. It is not clear how we can on the one hand stick with our picture of a world that is there for us to discover and which has us as just a small part of it, while at the same time elaborating on how the world in the end depends on us. But we can formulate conceptual idealism coherently. And if there is at least this kind of dependence, range dependence of the propositional, then this supports a version of idealism that we can make sense of.[35]

If externalism is true for talk about objects, but internalism is true for talk about propositions then ontological realism and conceptual idealism are natural consequences. What there is is in general independent of us. But what can in principle, by anyone, be said about it is not independent of us. To illustrate this again one last time, consider events. They, as entities, in general occur without us having anything to do with which ones occur and which ones don't. They are simply there. But what can be truly said about them, in the sense of what the possible range of a propositional or conceptual description of them is, is not independent of us. Internalism shows why and how we come in here, since the range of the propositional is not independent of us. That way ontological realism gets combined with conceptual idealism. Ontological realism is not compatible with the truth-dependence of propositions on us, since propositions about what there is can't depend on us for their truth while it is independent of us what there is. But the propositional can be range-dependent on us while ontological realism is true. There is no incoherence here since we are working with an object-permitting notion of the effable, and thus the range of the propositional can accommodate all there is, whatever it might be. Even though what things there are is independent of us, both in its range and for its existence, and even though these things can figure in the facts that can in principle obtain, the range of facts that can obtain is not independent of us. We can in principle eff everyone of them, on an object-permitting notion of effability, the relevant notion of

effability for our debate. The object-permitting conception of effability and internalism about talk about the propositional allow for the combination of the dependence of the facts on us, on the one hand, with the independence of the things on us, on the other.

6. CONCLUSION

Whether or not we should accept the ineffability thesis or the effability thesis depends on what we should think we do when we talk about propositions. If externalism is true about such talk then we should accept the ineffability thesis and the sub-algebra hypothesis. This would be insignificant for most of inquiry and ordinary life, since, on the sub-algebra hypothesis, the ineffable will be there, but it will be hidden from us in a way that makes clear why it is insignificant for these purposes. But the ineffable will be significant for metaphysics, in particular debates about what reality as a whole is like. We should expect that we will naturally be misled to believe that our sub-algebra is all there is. Here ineffability should lead to modesty in grand metaphysics.

But if, on the other hand, internalism is true about talk about propositions then the effability thesis will be true, and we can explain why it seems to us that some aspects of reality should be ineffable for us. No modesty would follow for metaphysics from this, but the metaphysical picture of the propositional that is tied to the internalist view of talk about propositions is itself a substantial consequence. It combines a version of realism, in that reality as what there is is independent of us, with a version of idealism, in that what there is to say about reality can all be said by us, as we are right now, not by mere accident, but for a reason. The internalist picture of the propositional makes clear why content cannot be beyond us and thus all there is to say about reality can be said by us in principle. Internalism thus implies conceptual idealism, but is compatible with ontological realism.

The question whether internalism or externalism is true about our talk about propositions is a largely empirical question about what we do when we talk about propositions. It is a question about our actual use of certain expressions in natural language, and thus something that we can't settle on the basis of *a priori* reflection. The crucial question on which this issue depends is thus one about language, and a largely empirical question at that. Idealism, properly understood, and the effability thesis follow if things turn out one way; ineffability and modesty follow if they turn out another. If the former then not only would it support idealism, which might sound bad enough, but furthermore it would support idealism on empirical grounds, which might sound even worse. Nonetheless, since I have argued in other

work that internalism about the propositional is, as best as I can tell, true, I side with idealism and the effability thesis.[36]

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