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A language can be pretty good for metaphysics without being ideal. We can say that a language is *adequate for metaphysics* if it can represent a good enough part of the facts in the domain of metaphysics. An adequate language might not be ideal, but at least it would be a good start. Our question in the following will be whether we should think that the languages that are accessible to human beings are ideal or at least adequate for metaphysics. Are the languages we can speak adequate or even ideal for metaphysics? And to carry it over to the level of thought, are the thoughts we can think adequate or ideal for metaphysics? If the answer is yes to both, then we are in great shape to carry out metaphysics. Metaphysics would be possible for human beings at least when it comes to representing the facts, although we might still be limited in when it comes to knowing the facts. Our concern here is not epistemic, but representational. On the other hand, if it turns out that the languages we can speak are neither ideal nor adequate, then metaphysics seems to be beyond what human beings can hope to do. Not only will we not be in a position to know what the metaphysically relevant facts are, we will not even be in a position to represent them. Any limitation on what we can represent in thought or language is a limitation on what we can know, since to know that p one has to be able to represent that p and to think that p . If our languages are not ideal but adequate, then metaphysics is in decent shape, but limited. That might not be too bad, depending on how far from ideal our adequate languages might be. So, are our human languages adequate, or even ideal, for metaphysics?

Considering this question brings up the thought that maybe we are not even close. The worry here is that metaphysics hopes to be ambitious: it aims to find out about reality as a whole, not merely to settle some local question of fact.



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Second, it could be that a certain fact requires a representation of a different kind than a subject-predicate presentation. We could fail to be able to fill in the content of a kind of representation we have available, as when we are unable to represent an object or a property, or we might be unable to have a certain form or structure of representation available at all, as when we need a different kind of representing a fact than the kinds we have available. Facts of the former kind we can call *content ineffable*, and facts of the latter kind we can call *structurally ineffable*. Structurally ineffable facts are intuitively more alien to our minds than content-ineffable ones. The content-ineffable ones are at least of the same kind as the kinds of facts we can represent. They are facts of an object having a property, or some other kind that we can represent, even though we can't represent that particular object or property. Structurally ineffable facts are facts of a completely different kind than the facts we can represent. And structurally ineffable ones are what is truly worrisome and behind a certain way of thinking of the Dark Vision. Some parts of reality might be completely alien to our minds and languages, in the sense that the kinds of representation available to us are insufficient to even represent these kinds of facts. And if we can't even represent facts of this kind, how can we hope to have a complete general story of what reality is like? In particular, if some of these structurally ineffable facts are in the domain of metaphysics, then metaphysics can hope for partial success here or there, but its ambitions will have to be limited by that alone.

In the following, I will focus on structural ineffability. It is the most worrisome kind, and it is also in a sense the easier one to discuss. To properly discuss content ineffability, one needs to look more closely at the notion of what is in principle expressible by human beings. This notion is not easy to make clearer, although I believe it can be spelled out in more detail.² Doing so, however, will require almost as much space as I have here overall, and so it is best to leave it aside for now and focus on structural ineffability instead. Any fact that is structurally ineffable is in principle unrepresentable by us, in the sense that no matter what we do, no matter how long we live, our minds just aren't suitable to represent them. Our main question about the adequacy of human minds and languages for metaphysics thus turns into these: are there any structurally ineffable facts? And if so, are any in the domain of metaphysics?

In the rest of this chapter I would like to present an argument that answers this question. I will argue that there are no structurally ineffable facts at all, and thus that there are none in the domain of metaphysics. This might seem like a tough task, since to answer the question it would seem that one needs to know two things and put them together properly. First, one needs to know which facts can be represented in our thought or language, and second, one needs to know which

² I have done my best in Hofweber (2017).

facts obtain. Once one has both figured out, one can then answer the question by comparing the two. But that strategy is obviously hopeless. We won't be able to first figure out what reality is like and which facts obtain just so we can answer the question whether we can represent all of them. Instead I will argue from considerations about our language alone that we can see that structural ineffability can never obtain. By looking at our language alone, we can see that our language is able to represent all the facts, at least when it comes to their structure.³ Furthermore, this argument can be extended to the conclusion that our language is able to represent all the facts full stop, not just with regards to their structure but also with regards to their content. However, this stronger claim requires some details that I have developed elsewhere but won't be able to discuss in this chapter. I will point to the relevant texts where appropriate, but even focusing on structure alone should be significant. That the structure of the facts matches the kinds of thoughts or kinds of languages we can have is not trivial, and that we can show this from considerations about our languages and thoughts alone, without looking at the facts, must seem hopeless. Nonetheless, just this is the case, or so I hope to argue in the following.

5.2 Talk about Facts

Before we return to our discussion of the language of metaphysics, we will need to consider how we talk about facts. I hope to make clear in section 5.3 that this is central for our main concern. The issues in this section are simply about our own natural language, and many of the questions raised here are simply empirical questions about this language—questions about what we do when we do certain things with certain phrases in our speech. As such empirical questions, they are complex and involved, and I can't hope to resolve any substantial issues about language in this chapter. Instead I hope to highlight that a certain debate about natural languages, one I will outline shortly, is closely tied to our main question of the adequacy of human natural languages for metaphysics. I will state below which side in this debate I have defended in some detail elsewhere. Furthermore, I will have to sideline some issues that give rise to further complexities. Here, first and foremost, I would like to sideline the issue whether or not all human languages are the same in the regard to be discussed shortly. The view defended here does not depend on all human languages being the same, but the situation gets easier if they are. I will therefore focus on talk about facts in the language in which I write: English. Thus in the following I will argue that largely empirical

³ For a different argument that structural ineffability is impossible, see Filcheva (2020).

Most directly we talk about facts with the use of that-clauses or phrases like 'the fact that p':

- (1) a. That p is surprising.

(2) Something is surprising.

But is this quantifier inference really a decisive reason for fact-terms being referential? Quantification in natural language might not always be used in just this

⁵ See Bach (1997), King (2002), Moltmann (2003), Hofweber (2016b), and many others.

⁶ See the references in footnote 5 for more on this 'substitution problem'.

(3) Something is F.

(4) I need an assistant.

to

(5) I need something.

On this reading quantifiers are used for their *inferential role*. They are used in such a way that the inference from 'F(t)' to 'Something is F' is always and trivially valid. Now, whether quantifiers really have these two readings is simply a question about our own language. Maybe they do, maybe they don't, but this is an issue just about our own language. Suppose, then, that they do have these readings, as I believe they do.⁷ We can note first that these two readings must differ in truth conditions. If the inference from (4) to (5) is valid, but if there is no assistant in the domain that I need, then the two readings come apart in truth conditions, and thus they make different contributions to the truth conditions. But what then are the truth conditions of the inferential-role reading of the quantifier?

Those truth conditions need to be such that they give rise to the inferential role. And that role is that for any instance in our language $F(t)$, it implies that something is F . There are different truth conditions that would give rise to this inferential role, but there is one that is the simplest one: the quantified sentence ‘something is F ’ needs to be truth-conditionally equivalent to the disjunction over all the instances that imply it. If there are only three instances, **then** if ‘something is F ’ is truth-conditionally equivalent to ‘either $F(a)$ or $F(b)$ or $F(c)$ ’, then it will have just the inferential role for which we want it. In our case there are infinitely many instances, but that doesn’t change the main point. To have the inferential role of being implied by any instance in our language, the simplest truth conditions that give it this inferential role are to be equivalent to the disjunction of all

⁷ I argued for this in much more detail in chapter 3 of Hofweber (2016b).

I will in the following call the domain-conditions reading of the quantifier also the *external reading*, since it requires something language-external: a domain of things. I will call the inferential-role reading the *internal reading*, since it is language-internal: it relates sentences within the language to another one with the language. Using this terminology, we can thus sum up that on this view of quantification, quantifiers are semantically underspecified and they have an internal and external reading. And these are congenially paired with the views that that-clauses are or are not referential. If that-clauses are not referential, then we would really mess things up if we used quantifiers over facts in the external reading. And if that-clauses are referential, then the external reading of the quantifier would be a perfect match for that. If we aim to pick out things in a domain of entities with that-clauses, then naturally we should quantify over that domain when we quantify over facts. And if that-clauses are not referential, then it would be confused to quantify over facts by quantifying over a domain of entities. There are thus two kinds of views about what we do when we talk about facts:

- To be sure, the above was merely an outline of a view of quantification in natural language. The proper story is a lot more complicated, since the above outline neglects contextual contributions to content and truth conditions, and it is only outlined for the simplest cases of quantifiers. But this story can be spelled out more properly, and I have done my best to do so in chapters 3 and 9 of Hofweber (2016b). Furthermore, these complications that I skip [here](#) actually matter for our issue here, but they are too involved to properly discuss now. We can avoid these issues by focusing on structural ineffability instead of full ineffability, and I will return to this issue later on. For now, let's put this aside and consider only the simplified proposal. Here, too, we should say that this is a question about our own language; it is an issue that concerns what we do when we quantify and use quantifiers. As such, it is a largely empirical issue that is reasonably up for debate. But

This argument must seem puzzling, to say the least. We were able to argue that our natural language is ideal, or at least structurally ideal, by relying only on considerations about our own language. No assumptions were made about which sentences are true or false; the argument simply proceeded from a view about what we do when we talk about facts, and thus a view about what we aim to do when we talk this way, without assuming that our aims are met. We never made any assumptions about what reality in general is like. But how could it be that one could argue for the adequacy of our own language to represent all of reality by looking only at our language, and not otherwise at reality at all? No such argument should be possible, since the issue is about the match between two things—language and reality—and one can't determine that by looking at just one of these two things: language. What's more, the argument seems to be the kind of an argument that we have reason to believe is never a good argument. It seems to aim to draw metaphysical conclusions about reality from merely how we aim to represent reality. And this seems to be impossible, since metaphysics concerns reality, not what we aim to do with reality. It is one thing to aim to represent reality in a particular way, and another thing for those representations to be accurate. Only the latter allows for conclusions about what reality is like. There seems to be a gap, which we can call *the language-metaphysics gap*, that needs to be bridged for the above argument to get off the ground, and it seems that this gap can't be bridged.⁸ And thus the above argument must go wrong somewhere.

⁸ Heather Dyke calls drawing conclusions about the world from how we talk about the world 'the representational fallacy' in Dyke (2008), something she rejects. As will become clear, I do not agree that this is indeed always a mistake.

Even if it is possible to draw conclusions about reality from considerations about our own language, it might be argued that this is only a shallow victory, and the true metaphysical issues remain. One thought that motivates this reaction is that if internalism is indeed true for our talk about facts, then we made a mistake in thinking of reality as the totality of facts. The totality of facts is too closely tied to us and our talk about reality. We thus need to talk about something else instead. Maybe not facts, but truths, or maybe something totally different altogether. Although this sounds good at first, it quickly goes nowhere. First, switching from facts to truths won't change the overall situation. Not only are facts closely connected to truths, in the sense that for every fact there is a corresponding truth, and the other way round, but also the arguments in favor of internalism about talk about facts carry over to arguments in favor of internalism about talk about truths. If we shift away from facts, it would need to be something rather different. Some substitute for them, but something not of the kind that we generally talk about with a *that*-clause. We need to move away from facts to facts*, or whatever that substitute for facts might be called. But such a shift in focus and target of inquiry also shifts us away from reality. Reality is the totality of facts, not the totality of facts*, or so is our concept of reality. We will then need to direct our attention not to reality, but to reality*. But how could we ever rationally move away from facts, truth, and reality, and instead make facts*, truth*, and reality* our target of inquiry? Inquiry aims at the truth and the facts. To truly follow this

perfect harmony in this regard, but also a closely connected form of idealism. How that is supposed to go is another story. But our main lesson for the language of ontology and the language of metaphysics is this: if internalism is true, then there is a close connection between what we can in principle represent and which facts can in principle obtain. If this connection obtains, then there is no limit to the ambitions of metaphysics as carried out by us from a possible representational limitation of our thoughts and languages. But if externalism is true, then there is no such guarantee of our representational tools being adequate to carry out metaphysics. If the facts are independent of our representations, then there is no guarantee that the language required to represent all of them or just the ones most relevant for metaphysics is a language we humans can speak. In fact, we should expect to be limited in this regard, and thus take more caution in metaphysics. If externalism is true, then a form of intellectual humility is appropriate in metaphysics, as argued for in Hofweber (2016a). But if internalism is true, then metaphysics does not face any representational obstacles to its ambitions, in part because of a connection between the totality of facts and our languages. Ambitious metaphysics stands or falls with idealism, or so this argument suggests.

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