Idealism and the Harmony of Thought and Reality

Thomas Hofweber
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
hofweber@unc.edu

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

1. Idealism and our place in the world

What are the place and significance of human beings in the world as a whole? Are we special and central, or just an afterthought? When the overall story of reality is written, are we discussed in the main text, or are we merely mentioned in a footnote? Although these are natural and pressing questions to ask, they are also not very clear questions as stated, and it isn't obvious how to state them better. For example, we might well be special in many ways. We might be the best at music in all of reality, and that would indeed make us special. But by itself this does not make us special in the right way, nor any more special than, say, the largest volcano. The largest volcano would also be special in a sense; it is the largest one after all. But reality as a whole might not care about volcanoes, and similarly, it might not care about music.

Mind, Vol. 128 . 511 . July 2019
doi:10.1093/mind/fzy086 Advance Access publication 19 February 2019

The real question is not about being best or worst in some way, but about something different. It is about being central to the world considered as a whole, central for its large-scale and most general features. Or to put it differently: it is about being metaphysically central to reality. Although this still isn't very precise, it is at least better. And we can do even better by approaching the question via its two most prominent answers, which would seem to answer the question as it is intended, and which thereby also illuminate the question itself. On one of these answers we are not special, and on the other one we are.

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

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

Both of these answers are well known and widely defended. But there is also a third answer to the question about our place in the world. This answer is not widely known or widely defended, at least not these days. It is an idealist answer, which holds that we are metaphysically central to reality since there is a close connection between reality itself and our minds. Our minds are centrally involved in what reality is, and because of this close connection we are special in the world as a whole. Such an idealist position was not unheard of during some parts of the history of philosophy, but it does seem more than dated now and excessively anthropocentric. Why would it be that our human minds are metaphysically central to all of reality? Who would think that we are so special that reality itself is tied to us? And there is no denying that this is prima facie the right reaction to have towards

such a form of idealism. But still, I hope to argue in this paper that there is good reason to think that idealism so understood is true after all. I will try to make precise in what sense we are metaphysically central to reality, and present an argument for our being central in just this way. The argument would show that we are metaphysically central to reality as a whole, not via a connection to a divine being, but more directly. And the way we are central is properly a form of idealism, although not one of the better known versions of idealism.

2. Idealism via harmony

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

But this characterization of idealism may also be too broad, in that it encompasses many theistic views, which might or might not fit the spirit of idealism. For example, it seems to include the view that a divine mind is metaphysically central to the world, since it created the material world. I won't try to settle these matters of terminology, since we won't simply discuss idealism in the broad sense here, or what place a divine mind might have in the world. Our focus will not be on whether minds in general are

metaphysically central to reality, but whether our human minds in particular are metaphysically central. Let us call the view that minds or the mental in general are metaphysically central to reality *broad idealism*, and the view that our human minds are metaphysically central to reality *strong idealism*.[1]

Only strong idealism would give us a third answer to the big question about our place in the world. And it is this idealist view in particular that must seem absurd and an expression of anthropocentric hubris of an extreme kind. Why would we human beings be metaphysically central to the world? To be sure, there are a number of options on the table, but little reason to think that those options obtain. Maybe we are the only creatures who think about reality and who understand parts of it. And maybe the purpose of reality is self-understanding, and we are the agents of that understanding. That would make us central, but we have little reason to think that reality has any such purpose, or that we are the only ones who understand parts of it. Or maybe reality is constructed from some mental phenomena, and it is so constructed by us. But besides the question of why one should think so, this gives rise to the question of how this is compatible with many facts we have found out about the world: that there were rocks long before there were humans, that some parts of the world are too far away for us to interact with, and so on. Maybe such a version of idealism can be defended somehow, but it should be clear that this will be a real challenge, and not one we have good reason to think can be met.[2] However one might want to do this, one will have to meet some constraints: one has to explicitly formulate the idealist position one hopes to defend, one has to make clear that this position is compatible with what we otherwise know to be the case, and one has to give an argument that idealism so formulated is indeed correct. And given these constraints, it is hard to see how one could defend a form of strong idealism.

[1] Broad and strong idealism are not opposites, but focus on two separate dimensions of idealism. Broad idealism concerns the centrality of minds in reality in general, not something narrower like the relationship between minds and matter or the grounding of non-mental facts in mental facts. Strong idealism focuses on our human minds, not something weaker such as any minds. A narrower version of idealism could also be strong. For example, it might hold that our minds in particular give rise to matter. In this paper, I will understand idealism in general broadly, and then investigate whether a strong form of idealism so understood is true.

[2] Some philosophers have recently defended such broadly phenomenalist versions of idealism, for example, Foster (2008) and Pelczar (2015). For a sympathetic discussion, but not a full endorsement, of phenomenalism, see Yetter-Chappell (2018). I argue against phenomenalism in Hofweber (forthcoming, ch. 2).

Nonetheless, there are a number of options for defending idealism, including ones that meet the above constraints.[3] Some of the options can be made vivid by thinking about each of the three parts in our characterization of idealism: (1) *minds* being (2) *metaphysically central* to (3) *reality*. We can first wonder which parts of our minds might be central: perception, consciousness, conceptual thought, emotion, and so on. We can wonder in what sense our minds might be central. And finally we can wonder what reality is supposed to be. I would like to jump straight to the last one now, since a crucial distinction about reality strikes me as a key to progress.

Reality famously can be thought of in two ways: as the totality of things or as the totality of facts. Reality can be understood either as all there is, or as all that is the case. Some philosophers think that only one of these is properly called 'reality', while the other is to be called something else.[4] But this should best be seen as introducing unambiguous terminology to make an ordinary, underspecified notion of reality precise. The concept of reality is naturally clarified by distinguishing two different things one might mean by it: what is the case or what is. And consequently we can distinguish two versions of idealism. First, *ontological idealism*, which holds that minds are central for reality understood as the totality of things, and second, *alethic idealism*, which holds that minds are central for reality understood as the totality of facts. Since we will only focus on strong idealism here—the version of idealism that claims that our human minds are central—we will take both versions of idealism as versions of strong idealism, and thus versions which hold that our human minds are central for reality understood in one way or the other. At first this distinction might seem legitimate but not helpful. All the prima facie problems one might have with strong idealism seem to apply to either one of these two forms. Not only did things exist long before there were humans, but some facts obtained long before there were humans. In addition, there is a close relationship between what there is and what is the case. For any thing that exists there is a fact that this thing exists.

[3] For a critical survey of several of them, see Hofweber (forthcoming). They include a number of views debated in the more recent metaphysics literature, for example, conventionalism about compositions (Einheuser 2006), fragmentalism tied to subjects (Fine 2005), and the subjectivity thesis (defended in Koch 2006a, 2006b; see Hofweber 2015 for critical discussion).

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

And also the other way round: for any fact that some thing exists there has to exist that thing for the fact to obtain. Ontological and alethic idealism seem to be equally problematic.

However, there is a way of motivating idealism which is tied to this distinction between thinking of reality as either the totality of facts or the totality of things. Focusing on reality as the totality of facts in particular, we can note that facts are often similar to each other in particular ways. For example, the fact that Sue is tall is similar in one way to the fact that Joe is hungry. Both facts are facts of an object having a property. We can say that these facts share a structure: they have an object-property structure. Talk of structure is supposed to be taken in an innocent sense here, if that is at all possible. That these facts have an object-property structure is, in the relevant sense of the phrase, a consequence of their being facts of an object having a property. To say that facts have a structure in our sense does not endorse a particular metaphysics of facts; nor does it use a substantial metaphysical notion of structure.[5] It only puts a label on the obvious: some facts are facts of objects having properties, other facts are different kinds of facts.[6] The structure of facts seems to have a connection to our thoughts. We represent facts in conceptual thought, as well as in language, in the obvious way that the fact that Sue is tall is represented by my thought that Sue is tall and by the sentence 'Sue is tall'. This thought, or sentence, in turn has a particular form: it is a thought, or sentence, of a predicate being attributed to a subject. Such thoughts and sentences we can thus say have a subject-predicate form. Naturally, there is a connection between the thought and the fact it is about. The form of the thought seems to match up perfectly with the structure of the fact. A subject-predicate thought represents a fact with an object-property structure. In this simple case there seems to be a perfect match between the form of our thought and the structure of the fact that it represents. But why is there this match? Does this correspondence of form and structure need, and allow for, an explanation?

There are two straightforward ways in which this correspondence could be explained, based on two different directions of what is

[5] See Sider (2011) for the latter.

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

explanatorily more basic: the form of our thoughts or the structure of the facts. The realist[7] will hold that our thoughts have their form because the facts have the corresponding structure. And an idealist can see it the other way round: the facts have the structure because our thoughts have the form. At first it must seem that the realist got it right. The realist has a perfectly good explanation of why some of our thoughts have a subject-predicate form, which in outline goes as follows. Our minds developed in a world full of facts that have an object-property structure, that is, of objects having properties. It would be quite inefficient for our minds to have a separate representation for each fact, in particular since the same object often has many properties and the same property is often had by many objects. Thus our representations developed to exploit the structure of the facts and their components. Therefore we ended up with separate representations for the object and the property: a subject and a predicate, which get combined somehow to represent the whole fact. And thus our minds have representations that have a subject-predicate form, which exactly corresponds to the object-property structure of the facts.

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

[7] A realist here is just an anti-idealist. On other uses of 'realist', an idealist can and often will be a realist as well. For example, the version of idealism defended below is fully realist in other senses of the word.

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

Let us call a fact which we human beings cannot represent in thought or language an *ineffable fact*. This notion is so far unclear, since it is unclear how 'we' and 'cannot' in its definition are to be understood. 'We' could be understood narrowly or widely, possibly varying across time and across linguistic communities. What human beings can represent might differ over time and in different languages. Similarly, 'cannot' can be understood narrowly or widely: what we cannot represent given how long we in fact live and how much we can say in a lifetime, or what we cannot represent in principle, even with more time. Neither way of making the notion of the ineffable more precise is better than the other by itself. But since our concern here is the place of humanity in general we should take the notion in its wide sense in each case. The ineffable should be seen as that which cannot be represented by any human being, no matter what language they speak or when or how long they live. The ineffable in this sense is a limitation of humanity. If there are ineffable facts in this sense, this would point to a real mismatch between our minds and reality. We are limited in what we can represent about the world, not just because of a limitation of the particular language we happen to speak, or because our lives are just a little too short, but because our mind is just not suited to representing some parts of reality.[8]

In essence, there could be two main reasons why a fact is ineffable for human beings in principle. They can be illustrated by two reasons why we might be unable to represent a fact with a subject-predicate representation. First, it could be that the fact is a fact of an object having a property, but we are somehow unable either to represent the object or to represent the property. Second, it could be that in order to represent the fact we need a different kind of representation, one with a form other than a subject-predicate representation. The fact then is

[8] For a more detailed discussion of the notion of the ineffable and different ways to make it more precise, see Hofweber (2017) and Jonas (2016). Whether different human languages differ in what they can represent is discussed in, for example, von Fintel and Matthewson (2008).

not one of an object having a property, but a different kind of fact. We can consequently distinguish two kinds of ineffable facts. First, a fact *F* is *structurally ineffable* if none of the forms we have available are suitable to represent a fact with the structure of fact *F*. The structure of *F* would require a form of representation that goes beyond the forms we have access to.[9] Second, a fact *F* is *content ineffable* if it has a structure that matches one of our forms, but somehow we are unable to fill in the relevant parts: maybe we can't represent an object, or a property, or the like. Structurally ineffable facts are truly alien to us, while content ineffable facts are not all that alien, since they are at least facts of the same general kind as facts we can represent.

We can now say that our minds and reality are in *structural harmony* just in case there are no structurally ineffable facts. Our minds and reality are in *complete harmony* just in case there are no ineffable facts at all, neither structurally ineffable facts nor content ineffable facts. If harmony, be it structural or complete, obtains, then this could be by accident or for a reason. It could be, for example, that all facts are just facts of objects having properties. Maybe the world is simple in this way, and then our minds would be good enough to represent all the facts at least in their structural aspects, and maybe even completely. There would then be no structurally ineffable facts, not because of an intimate connection between our minds and reality, but because we got lucky in that reality is simple and uniform enough for the forms of our thoughts to be good enough to match the structure of all the facts. But we would be lucky if that were the case, and we should thus not expect it. Not all the facts are this simple, since many facts we can represent don't have simply the structure of an object having a property: there are conjunctive facts, universal facts, and so on. We have more forms of thought than simply subject-predicate representations, and since we have good reason to think that some of those representations represent accurately, we have reason to think that the facts that obtain don't all have the structure of an object having a property. So why should we think that all the structure that might be realized in facts is structure corresponding to one of our forms of thought?

The realist should expect that structurally ineffable facts are at least possible, and not ruled out in principle. If there aren't any, we got

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

lucky, but there is no guarantee that we should get lucky. The idealist, on the other hand, could turn this around and aim to support idealism via an argument that structural ineffability is ruled out in principle. The reason why there aren't, and can't be, any structurally ineffable facts might support idealism, since it might make clear that there is an intimate connection between the form of our thoughts and the structure of the facts. It might be that our minds limit the range of facts that could in principle obtain, in that any fact that could obtain is required to have a structure corresponding to a form of our thought. And if so then we might be central in reality after all, since we play a central role in reality understood as the totality of facts. The facts might have to conform to our form of thought, not by accident, but for a reason that makes clear that our minds are central in reality.[10]

To try to motivate idealism via considerations of the harmony of thought and reality is so far only a strategy for a defence. If it were successful, it might well support a version of idealism rather different from versions where the material world is somehow constructed from phenomena or otherwise tied to our perceptual experience. Whether this strategy is at all fruitful will depend on two things: first, whether there is a good argument that harmony has to obtain in the first place; second, whether this argument can be seen as providing the right kind of reason for why harmony obtains, namely, the kind of reason that would support idealism. In the following I would like to argue that this strategy is indeed successful.

3. Harmony via internalism

In this section I will present the argument that structural harmony must obtain. The argument will be slightly unusual for its desired conclusion, in that it comes from considerations in the philosophy of language, in particular, what we do when we talk about facts or propositions. Obviously, facts about natural language are controversial and non-trivial, and I won't be able to argue for these largely empirical claims in detail here. I will instead present two sides of an ongoing debate, and argue that harmony follows if we take one of those sides. So for the most part, my argument in this paper is of a conditional

[10] Thomas Nagel is slightly unusual, but I believe correct, when in Nagel (1986, pp. 93 ff.) he takes the real issue about idealism and realism to be whether the world might outrun our representational capacities. Nagel, of course, rejects idealism so understood.

form: if we take this side in the debate in the philosophy of language, then harmony must obtain and idealism follows. For almost anyone, both sides in the debate in the philosophy of language should seem reasonable. But the conclusion is not merely conditional in the end. I have argued in detail elsewhere that the side of the debate in the philosophy of language that leads to idealism is indeed the correct one.[11] Whether this is ultimately so is beyond the scope of the present paper, and thus I focus on the conditional claim.

I will also have to simplify in two ways, mostly out of the necessity to keep the discussion short enough to fit into this paper. First, I will largely ignore context-sensitive expressions. I will explain below why this simplification is legitimate. Second, I will focus on the language in which I write: English. There is a more complex question whether the considerations given below carry over to other human languages as well. The argument to follow does not depend on all human languages being the same in this regard, but the situation gets more complicated if there is variation among human languages in certain ways. I have discussed this issue in more detail in Hofweber (2006), but leave it largely aside below. We will thus use English as the example language. Even with these simplifications, the argument to follow should seem significant enough, since it would seem that no conclusion like idealism could possibly follow from considerations about natural language alone, even if that language is English. After presenting the argument I will therefore discuss in some detail how an argument like this could possibly establish a metaphysical conclusion like idealism.

3.1 Talk about facts and propositions

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

(1) That *p* is surprising.

(2) The fact that *p* is surprising.

That-clauses do not always stand for facts. Sometimes they stand for propositions, as when someone believes that *p*, but it is not the case that *p*, and thus not a fact that *p*. But for any true that-clause there will be a corresponding fact that *p*. Whether facts just are true propositions, or whether they merely correspond to true propositions, won't

[11] See, in particular, Hofweber (2016, chs. 3, 8 and 9).

matter for us here. What matters instead is this question: when we use a that-clause or fact-term, are we thereby referring to some thing or entity? Are fact-terms like names for entities which are facts, or are they non-referential expressions? When I utter (1), am I referring to some entity and saying of it that it is surprising? Or am I doing something else with the that-clause, something other than referring?

There are good reasons to support either answer, and which is right is actively debated in the literature in the philosophy of language.[12] One strong reason against that-clauses and fact-terms being referential is the substitution argument. It seems that these expressions do not have a feature expected from referential expressions: that they can be substituted for a co-referential expression without change of truth conditions. This does not always seem to be the case. For example, there appears to be a difference in truth conditions between the following:

(3) John fears that his mother will find out.

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

The former is fear concerning John's mother, the latter is proposition-phobia, fear of propositions themselves, which is different.

Nonetheless, there are also good reasons in favour of them being referential, first among them being the quantifier inferences. From (1) as well as (2) it follows that

(5) Something is surprising.

And for (5) to be true it seems that it must be the case that there is some thing or entity which is surprising. And that thing or entity seems to be just what the that-clause of the fact-term is referring to.

So substitution speaks prima facie against fact-terms being referential, quantifier inferences speak prima facie for them being referential. Reasonable people can and do disagree on what we should say about this. It is simply a question in the philosophy of language. For all we know, it might turn out one way or the other. If fact-terms are referential, then something needs to be said about the substitution arguments. If they are non-referential, then something needs to be said about quantification. Let's think a bit more about the second one:

[12] For example, Bach (1997), Moltmann (2003), Schiffer (1987, 2003), King (2002), Rosefeldt (2008), Hofweber (2016), and many more.

what is going on in the quantifier inferences, in particular, if that-clauses are not referential?

3.2 Quantification over facts and propositions

If fact-terms are not referential, how should we understand the quantifier inferences? It won't do simply to insist that they are not valid, not only since they quite clearly are valid, but also because quantification over facts and propositions plays an important role in communication, and shouldn't just be tossed aside. Instead, we should accept something like the following view of quantification in natural language. This view is congenial to a non-referential picture of that-clauses, but it can be motivated quite independently of it. Whether it is the best such view, and whether it is the correct view of quantification in natural language, is again something reasonable people can disagree about, but let us simply see where it would take us.[13]

The view is the following. Although quantifiers are often used in just the way indicated above, where they make a claim about a domain of entities, they are not always used in this way. Instead, quantifiers are used in two different ways, and they systematically have two different readings. One reading is the more or less standard one, which I will call the *domain-conditions reading*, since when we employ it we impose a condition on the domain over which the quantifier ranges. When I say 'Something fell on my head', I make an assertion that is true just in case the domain of all objects contains at least one thing which has a certain feature: having fallen on my head. But quantifiers also have another reading. On this further reading they are used for their inferential role. In the case of 'something', the inferential role is simply to be able to infer from $F(t)$ that something is F. The term '*t*' can be any expression of the appropriate syntactic type, with no regard to its semantic function. 'Something', on this use, is more like a placeholder for a particular part of the sentence, in the sense that one can always validly replace a term '*t*' with 'something' without going from truth to falsity. Let us call this reading the *inferential reading*. On the inferential reading, quantified sentences inferentially relate to other sentences within one's own language, as opposed to drawing on a language-external domain of entities. In this sense, the inferential reading is internal to a language, relating sentences in it to each other, while

[13] Alternative views compatible with non-referential that-clauses can be found in, for example, Schiffer (1987) and Prior (1971).

the domain-conditions reading is external to it, drawing on a language-external domain of entities.

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

(6) I need an assistant. Thus I need something.

(7) I want a unicorn. Thus I want something.

To bring out the difference between the two readings, consider:

(8) Everything exists.

On the one hand, (8) seems to be true. All the things we quantify over, all the things in the domain of quantification, exist. But on the other hand, (8) seems to be clearly false: we know many counterexamples to this universal claim. We know many examples of things that don't exist: Santa, the Easter Bunny, etc. So how can everything exist when we know of things that don't exist? The tension arises, on this view of quantification, because two readings of 'everything' are at work here. On the domain-conditions reading, it is true that everything exists, while on the inferential reading, it is false. The inferential reading does not admit of counterexamples, but the domain-conditions reading can allow for true instances of '*t* does not exist', as long as '*t*' does not refer to an entity in the domain.

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

Let us thus take this view of quantification seriously for the moment. Quantifiers are polysemous: they can be used in two different ways, in their domain-conditions reading and their inferential reading. How should we understand the inferential reading more

precisely? What contribution to the truth conditions does it make such that the quantified sentence has the inferential role for which we want it? Focusing just on a simple case again, the inferential role of 'something' is that any instance is supposed to imply it. That is to say, any instance '$F(t)$' is supposed to imply 'something is F'. An instance here is understood simply grammatically, where 't' is an expression in our language of the proper syntactic type that can be combined with a predicate 'F' to form a sentence. Since the inferential reading inferentially relates sentences within our own language, the instances that we want to imply the quantified sentence are those in our own language. After all, we want an inferential reading that allows us to infer 'something is F' from all the instances '$F(t)$', and the instances for which we want this are first and foremost our instances, that is, the instances in our own language.

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

The truth conditions for 'everything' on its inferential reading are correspondingly equivalent to the conjunction of all the instances, which we can write as '$\bigwedge F(t)$' and which gives 'everything is F' the inferential role of implying each instance '$F(t)$'. However, this can only

be an outline of what the truth conditions of the inferential reading of quantifiers are in full. We neglected contextual contributions to content; we looked only at the simplest cases of quantifiers, not generalized quantifiers; and so on. The treatment of inferential quantifiers outlined here is thus only an outline. A much more detailed discussion of the internal reading of quantifiers is given in Hofweber (2016, chs. 3 and 9), but the details are not essential for our main goal here, and they are also too involved for this paper. I will thus leave them aside and work with just the outlined version given above, since this all we need for the main point I would like to get to now.

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

To put a label on these options, *internalism* is the view that that-clauses and fact-terms are used non-referentially, and quantifiers over facts are used in their inferential reading. On the other hand, *externalism* is the view that that-clauses and fact-terms are used referentially, and quantifiers over facts are used in their domain-conditions reading. This terminology, employing the internal–external metaphor, seems appropriate, since on the referential picture, talk about facts is about something external to the language—a domain of entities which is presumably simply there, waiting to be referred to—while on the non-referential picture, talk about facts is not about some language-

external domain of entities, and quantification over facts inferentially relates to the instances internal to one's own language.

Neither internalism nor externalism should be understood as claiming that that-clauses are absolutely always used one way or another. It is up to speakers to use expressions any way they want. The question cannot reasonably be whether 'the fact that *p*' is always used referentially or non-referentially, only whether there is a standard use one way or the other, or whether they in general are used one way or another. I can name my cat 'the fact that snow is white', and thus use that phrase referentially when I talk about my cat. But this is not what matters for our issue here, and it does not refute internalism. Nor would a similar example of non-referential use refute externalism, although such cases need to be acknowledged. What concerns us here is how these phrases are in general, normally, or standardly used. Anyone who uses them otherwise would use them contrary to how they are normally used. And anyone who uses them differently from how they are standardly used would not speak of facts as we normally do.

Both internalism and externalism are simply views about what we do when we talk about facts. To decide between them, we need to look at issues about language, the role of quantifiers in communication, the substitution behaviour of fact-terms, and so on. None of these issues seem to presuppose anything substantial about metaphysics. They are metaphysically unloaded questions about our actual use of that-clauses, fact-terms, and quantifiers. What is the right thing to say here should again be an issue about which reasonable people can disagree. Maybe the evidence will point one way or the other. And which way it will go will to a large extent be an empirical issue about what we in fact do.

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

3.3 Internalism and structural ineffability

Suppose, at least for a good part of the remainder of this paper, that the empirical evidence points one way, and internalism turns out to be correct. Suppose that our talk about facts and propositions is as the internalist picture has it. What then becomes of our question about

the harmony of thought and reality and its connection to idealism? This was a question about whether there is a guaranteed harmony between the form of our thoughts and the structure of the facts. And this in turn is closely tied to the question whether there are structurally ineffable facts, and if not, whether such facts are ruled out for a reason or whether they merely happen not to obtain. There is a straightforward argument that shows that if internalism is true, then such harmony is guaranteed. Internalism, simply a view about our talk about facts, guarantees that ineffable facts are ruled out and our minds and reality are in harmony.

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

(9) There are structurally ineffable facts.

(10) There are structurally ineffable propositions.

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

(11) Every fact is structurally effable.

(12) Every proposition is structurally effable.

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

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

In the case of facts, it is the following slightly more complex conjunction:

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

No matter which case we consider, the result is the same. These conjunctions are true just in case each conjunct is true. But every conjunct is just an instance, in our own language: that snow is white is structurally effable, that grass is green is structurally effable, and so on. Each one of these instances is true. Some instances might be very long and complex, involving billions of words. Such instances might not in fact be representable by any human being. The representations involved are just too long; our brains would run out of space and our lives would be over before we were done representing them. But even in these cases the facts are structurally effable. The form or structure of our representations is enough to represent them, even if the size of our brains or the length of our lives is not. The forms of our representations are thus good enough to represent the structure of any fact.[14]

And this is no accident; it has to be so. On the relevant reading, it can't be that there are some facts that are structurally ineffable. This last sentence can be understood in two ways, corresponding to (i) more or different facts, or else (ii) less or different representational power of our minds. Of course, we could be worse off and not be able to represent some straightforward facts like the fact that snow is white. If we were all brain-dead, then we couldn't represent that fact. But the issue is not how we might be worse while the facts remain the same, but rather whether the facts could be different while we remain the same, so that some facts are now structurally ineffable. Could it be that there are facts with a structure that does not match any of the forms of our thoughts as we now have them? The answer is again no. In this very question just asked I used a quantifier over facts. Such quantification, according to internalism, is equivalent to the disjunction over the instances, our instances. That question is thus equivalent to the question whether it could be that $\bigvee$ that p is structurally ineffable. The instances for 'that p' here are just the same as before: all the instances in our present language. And keeping fixed what we in fact can represent, it is false that this could be. All of the ones that are, and all of the ones that could be, are structurally effable.[15]

[14] A different argument that structural ineffability is impossible is given by Krasimira Filcheva (MS). Filcheva argues that structural ineffability is conceptually ruled out, and that no metaphysical conclusions like idealism follow from this.

[15] How internal quantification interacts with modality is discussed in more detail in Hofweber (2006). The issue is a little more complicated once inferential quantifiers are

3.4 Internalism and idealism

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

Idealism is thus true; not ontological idealism, but alethic idealism. In general, we might have nothing to do with what there is, but we are central for what is the case, not because the obtaining of facts is, in general, tied to us, but because the range of what facts can in principle obtain is tied to us. These two ways in which facts can depend on us should be clearly distinguished. Let us say that a fact *truth-depends* on us just in case its obtaining depends on us. In this sense facts in general do not depend on us. The totality of facts *range-depends* on us just in case the range of all the facts, that is, which facts can in principle obtain, is tied to us. And in this sense facts depend on us, assuming internalism. We can call the version of alethic idealism which holds that reality as the totality of facts is range-dependent on us *conceptual idealism*.[16]

formulated to allow for context-sensitive instances, but the conclusion remains the same even then.

[16] The name 'conceptual idealism' is also used by Nicholas Rescher (1973) for a completely different view. This re-use of names for versions of idealism is unfortunately hard to avoid, given how many forms of idealism have been defended and named in the past. 'Conceptual idealism' is a fitting name for the view defended here, since it concerns the aspect of reality which is represented conceptually in a thought or judgement. That aspect of reality is not

The range-dependence of reality as the totality of facts on our minds is closely connected to harmony obtaining for a reason. The argument given above was intended to show that internalism guarantees that harmony has to obtain, and that thus reality as the totality of facts range-depends on us and our minds, as conceptual idealism would have it. The structures of the facts are tied to the forms of our thoughts, so that there has to be a harmony between them. And that is idealism.

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

Furthermore, it is natural to think that it can't be that one can draw metaphysical conclusions simply from considerations about language. The above argument must be mistaken, since it would need to overcome the insurmountable language–metaphysics gap: the impossibility of drawing metaphysical conclusions from premisses about language alone.[17] From considerations about language, one can't draw conclusions about what reality is like, only about how we represent reality to be. And thus the above argument must be mistaken. To be sure, one could argue for metaphysical conclusions from considerations about language together with the further assumption that certain representations in the given language represent reality correctly. But I didn't make any assumptions about which sentences are true, only what the semantic function and general use of that-clauses and quantifiers are. And such considerations are merely about the goals of what we hope to do, and those alone aren't a guide to larger features of reality.

The above argument must therefore be wrong, and there are a couple of places where one might suspect that it goes wrong. Or the argument must not be based on as innocent assumptions as I made it out to be. Maybe I smuggled in some idealism at the beginning, in

independent of our conceptual representations, according to the view, while other ones might well be.

[17] Heather Dyke (2008) calls drawing such conclusions 'the representational fallacy'.

what I claimed were only largely empirical considerations about our own language. But I will not draw these conclusions here. Instead I hope to show that these reservations are mistaken. The main argument given here does indeed assume only something about our own language, something largely empirical, and it does not smuggle in any metaphysical assumptions. Nonetheless, idealism follows. Idealism follows simply from considerations about our own language, on largely empirical grounds. Idealism can be established on largely empirical grounds, by thinking about our own language, and the language–metaphysics gap can be overcome, or so I hope to make clear now.

4. How the argument is possible

Consider again the question whether that-clauses are referring expressions. Being non-referential can be understood in two different ways, as being about language alone or else about the relationship between language and reality. The second way to be non-referential is paradigmatically exhibited by an empty name, a proper name that fails to refer to anything. Such an empty name has a semantic function—the function of referring to an object—but it fails to carry out that function. It is non-referential even though it aims to refer, since what it aims to refer to is not there. Whether a phrase is non-referential in this sense is thus not about language alone, but also about reality. But other expressions are non-referential in a different sense. These expressions have a semantic function completely different from referring. They include expressions of a grammatical category quite different from that of a name or singular term, but they also include phrases that can appear in subject position. Take 'nothing' as an example. It is a quantifier, and quantifiers are not referring expressions. Their semantic function is to make claims about a domain of entities, at least in the most familiar case, which I will use here to illustrate the main point about reference. 'Nothing' is non-referential, not in the sense that it aims to refer and fails to achieve its aim, but in the sense that it does something completely different semantically from referring. Quantifiers are not alone in this regard. On most views about natural language, most expressions are not referential in just this sense. They include expressions like 'very', 'many', 'if', 'few dogs who bark', and so on. Although these expressions are of various different syntactic categories, and have various different precise semantic

functions, they all have in common that they are non-referential in the sense that they semantically do something other than referring.

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

Similarly with that-clauses and talk about facts or propositions. Facts, if there are any at all, are just the kinds of things that fact-terms stand for: the fact that snow is white, the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$, and so on. But if internalism is true, then that-clauses and fact-terms like 'the fact that snow is white' and 'the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$' are non-referential. They are non-referential not because they aim to refer and fail but because semantically they do something other than referring. So, whatever things there might be, whatever entities might be part of reality, none of them is the fact that snow is white. To make this clear, just consider the last part of the last sentence just written: 'none of them is the fact that snow is white'. The quantifier 'none of them' ranges over the domain of things on its intended use, the things that are part of reality. But 'the fact that snow is white' as it was just used, according to internalism, is not a referring expression. It does something other than pick out some entity in the domain. Thus none of these things in the domain is picked out by this phrase, and so none of them is the fact that snow is white. And similarly for all the other examples of facts. Whatever things there might be, none of them is the fact that snow is white, and none of them is The Nothing. Even though 'the fact that *p*' and 'The Nothing' are non-referring, the sentences 'No entity is the fact that *p*' and 'No entity is The Nothing' are

perfectly grammatical. They are grammatical and true, and we can see that they are true simply by reflecting on what it means to be non-referential.

Thus if internalism about talk about facts is indeed correct, then none of the things contained in reality are facts. No facts exist, there is no ontology of facts, and facts are not entities or things. There could be all kinds of things, but whatever they might be, none of them is a fact, again assuming internalism. Facts still obtain, but they do not exist. It is no help to try to avoid this conclusion by insisting that one takes a fact just to be, say, an ordered pair of an object and a set of objects, or some other specified entity. There might well be such ordered pairs, but if internalism is true, then those are not facts. If internalism is true, then the fact that John is tall is not an ordered pair. The fact-term is not referential, and thus does not pick out any object in the domain, including any ordered pair that might be a member of the domain. And the same holds for any other fact-term. No entity in the domain can be identical to the fact that *p*, no matter which instance of '*p*' we consider.[18]

And this is a metaphysical conclusion drawn solely from considerations about our own language. Internalism guarantees that there are no facts, understood as involving the domain-conditions reading of the quantifier, and it guarantees that facts do not exist. Simply from considerations about our own language we are thus able to draw a conclusion about reality.

This bridges the language–metaphysics gap, at least for this particular case. But it does so in a different way from the way that is objectionable. The objectionable connection was to conclude from our attempts to represent the world that the world is more or less as we represent it. That poses an insurmountable gap, since no guarantee can be given, without further argument, that we succeed in what we aim to do when we represent the world. Examples of such connections would be arguments that hold that we should believe in an A-theory of time, since we represent temporal reality in a tensed language.[19] Or we should believe in an ontology of events, since our language is full of event-terms, and so on. Any such positive connection will have to be established via the truth of our representations, not simply via our attempts to represent in this way. But the direct connection between

[18] The significance of internalism for ontology is developed in more detail in Hofweber (2016).

[19] See Ludlow (1999), which defends a connection of this kind.

language and metaphysics defended here is of a different kind, one that is at first only negative, since it holds that what exists does not include facts. Such a connection is none the less a language-world connection, and one that proceeds purely from what our language is like to what reality is like. It does not assume that our talk about facts is true, only what we aim to do with such talk. Negative connections might not seem as consequential as positive ones, but this doesn't have to be so. To establish, at first purely negatively, that reality does not contain an ontology of facts has a number of significant further consequences. Although the most direct and most immediate bridging of the language–metaphysics gap is only negative, this negative consequence is connected to a number of positive conclusions, including idealism, or so I hope to argue in this paper.

Another way to see how these considerations can bridge the language–metaphysics gap is this: some questions about reality can be answered simply by thinking about the language we employ when we ask them. When we ask whether there are any facts or whether facts exist we are asking a question about reality. And in this case we can see from considerations about our own language alone that this question has a negative answer. We can see that that-clauses and fact-terms are not in the business of referring to entities, and we can similarly see that quantifiers have an internal, inferential reading as well as an external, domain-conditions reading. If so, then the question as it is intended employs the external reading of the quantifier. But the non-referentiality of that-clauses and fact-terms guarantees that external quantification over facts comes up empty: the domain does not contain any facts. Thus the question we asked has a negative answer, and we can see this from considerations about language alone, especially the language used in the question. Even though the question was a question about what reality is like, we can answer it by thinking about the language used in the question itself. Whether that was the right question to ask is, of course, another issue, and this is what we need to look at next.

5. But is it really idealism?

It must seem that the whole argument given so far is a cheat or a trick. It doesn't seem like the right kind of argument to support idealism. And this is the natural way to feel about it; I know the feeling myself. After all, the question is about the harmony between two different

things: the facts and our conceptual representations of them in thought or language. No argument looking at just one of the two should be able to conclude that both of them are intimately related. But I want to maintain nonetheless that the above argument does indeed establish idealism, assuming internalism. The reason ultimately is that internalism shows that the totality of facts and our representations of the facts are not two independent things. And since they are connected, looking at one can inform us about the other. Internalism is not only a view about our language; in addition, it leads to a larger metaphysical picture of the fact-like or proposition-like aspect of reality. And it is now in order not just to argue that the language–metaphysics gap can be bridged, but to make clear how these considerations about our language indeed support idealism. In this section I would like to work this out by considering a series of objections, why they are misguided, and why idealism follows from all of this.

The first objection to the main argument is that if internalism is indeed correct, then idealism was badly stated above. Internalism guarantees that there are no facts, that is to say, that facts do not exist. And if facts don't exist, then the totality of all facts doesn't exist either. But then, how can it be legitimate to think of reality as the totality of facts? And how can it be legitimate to think of idealism as alethic idealism, that is, as a position concerning our place in reality understood as the totality of facts? If internalism is true, then it was a mistake to think of reality in this way. And consequently it was a mistake to think of idealism as being either ontological idealism or alethic idealism. Idealism must be understood differently, the objection continues: either only as ontological idealism or in some completely different way. Thus the above argument misses its target, especially if its starting point is correct: if internalism is true, then this undermines the given formulation of idealism rather than establishing idealism.

Although this objection might at first seem compelling, it is nonetheless mistaken. What is uncontroversial here is that facts obtain; what is controversial is whether in addition facts exist. That $2+2=4$ is a fact is agreed upon by all in this debate, but whether there is an entity which is the fact that $2+2=4$ is what is at issue. As long as one does not deny that facts obtain, one can understand reality as the totality of all those facts that obtain, and for this it does not matter whether or not the totality of facts itself is an entity. All the facts that obtain together give us one way of thinking of what reality is

like. Thinking of reality as either all there is or all that is the case does not depend on facts themselves existing.

If anything, it is the other way round. Those who think that facts exist must also hold that the totality of things, which is the totality of what exists, includes the totality of facts. After all, the facts are just some of the things or entities which exist. The facts are subsumed under the things. If a substantial distinction is to be made in this regard—what exists is one thing, but what is true or what is the case is a further issue—then facts must themselves not be part of what exists. And that would be just so if facts obtain but do not exist. Whether they exist is, of course, a substantial question, but their existence should not be seen as required for the distinction between two senses of reality. On the contrary, the distinction is more significant if facts obtain but do not exist. Thinking of reality as all that is the case is legitimate as long as facts obtain, and thus our conclusion about the place of our minds in reality stands, since the obtaining of facts is not denied, only their existing.

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

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

How then should we state the question instead, and why should we think that this is indeed a better way to state it? There are two main ways to try this, one moderate and the other more radical. The moderate way attempts to state the proper question in other, familiar terms. Maybe it is the question whether we are central for all truths,

or all true propositions, or all contents, or something like that. But it is not hard to see that this approach will go nowhere, for at least two reasons. First, whatever reasons we have for thinking that internalism is true for talk about facts will carry over to a reason for internalism about talk about truths, true propositions, contents, and so on. All of those are talked about with that-clauses, and the question of internalism versus externalism is essentially the same for all of these cases. That is why internalism or externalism will apply uniformly to the propositional more broadly, that is, all the things we talk about with that-clauses: facts, truths, propositions, reasons, contents, and so on. Second, there are close connections between the concepts of a fact and a truth and a true proposition, and others that belong to the propositional. For every fact there is a truth, and for every truth a fact. And for every true proposition there is a truth, and so on. Whether facts are identical to truths, or just correspond to them, is thereby left open, but the correspondence has a status close to a conceptual truth. Thus the real issue is about the propositional more generally, and it is about a whole web of notions that are closely tied together. A moderate change from one part of this web to another won't lead to a completely new question. If internalism is true, then we are not just central to the facts, but to the propositional generally. If we didn't ask the proper question to begin with, then moving to a nearby alternative is not the way to get to it.

But maybe something more radical will do better. Talk about the facts is too closely tied to us to be suitable for stating the proper question, one might continue to object, in particular since quantification over facts on the internal reading merely generalizes over our instances. We can also quantify externally over facts; after all, speakers can use quantifiers on any reading they want, and both readings are always in principle available. But when we do so, such quantification is always vacuous, since—as we saw above—the domain of entities does not contain any facts. Nonetheless, we might hope to find some other entities in the domain, entities that are not tied to us and our representations, and then externally quantify over them to state the proper question. Facts won't work here, but some replacement of facts, call them 'facts*', might. Facts* might be some entities or other, maybe sets of worlds, or ordered pairs of things and sets of things, or maybe some things that have features fitting a pre-theoretic conception of what facts are like, or what have you. The proposal then is to state the proper question in terms of facts*, maybe as the question whether we are central to the totality of facts*.

This radical proposal strikes me as better than the moderate proposal above, but it too should be rejected. It is not a problem to introduce facts*; this can be done coherently in many different ways, and would indeed ask a quite different question when we ask about our place among the facts*. The problem with this proposal is why we should think that we are now asking a better question. And here it is hard to see what reason we might have for thinking so. Facts* are not facts, despite having a similar name. We have good reason to find out about the facts: this is just what we do when we try to find out what is true. Maybe some facts* correspond to facts in a way that can be made clear, and then we would have a reason to find out about those facts*, via our good reasons to find out about the facts. But it is hard to see what reason we would have to find out about the facts* and our place among them that goes beyond finding out about the facts. Facts have a special status when it comes to carrying out inquiry. Inquiry aims at the truth, and the truth corresponds to the facts. Thus it is at first natural to care about the facts, and thus to see reality as the totality of facts. It might also be nice to find out about facts*, whatever they might be, but should we replace finding out about the facts with finding out about the facts* or give the facts* some more distinguished place than the facts? Is asking about the facts* an improvement on asking about the facts?

The answer has to be no. The activity of trying to find out itself has a constitutive aim: the truth. Thus finding out concerns what is true, and thus the facts. Finding out is inquiry, which aims at the truth and the facts, and thus at reality understood as the totality of facts. To properly pull off the radical strategy, one has to be even more radical: one has to give priority not just to the facts* over the facts, but also to the other connected starred notions over their non-starred equivalents. Thus we should better carry out inquiry*, which aims at the truth* and what facts* obtain or exist, rather than plain old inquiry, truth and facts. But what reason could we have to abandon inquiry in favour of inquiry*, to find out what is true* rather than what is true? From our present standpoint, thinking about what we should and should not do, we are assessing what reasons we have for or against a change in our projects, including the project of inquiry itself. But there seems to be little wrong with inquiry as such. It might be suspicious that inquiry concerns the facts, and that if internalism is true, then we are central to the domain of inquiry itself. That might seem too idealistic, and a disappointing outcome for some, but it is hardly a good reason to overthrow the whole web of notions connected to the

propositional and replace them with starred substitutes, be it for inquiry generally or for the part of it that is metaphysics.[20]

Nonetheless, a feeling of a limitation given our situation must remain. To bring it out, we can imagine creatures simpler than us who speak a limited and primitive version of English, without some of the forms of representations that we have. They can go through the same argument given here for their language, and conclude, as they would put it, 'There are no facts which are structurally ineffable for us!' However, we know that the structure of the facts is not constrained by their thoughts. Some facts obtain which are structurally ineffable for them, and we could give an example relying on our extra forms. But then, why shouldn't we think that other creatures, powerful aliens, say, could look down at us as we look down at them? Such creatures could conclude that we human beings can't capture all the structure among the facts, and even give examples of facts structurally ineffable for humans? Maybe then we can't quite articulate how we are limited, but we should conclude nonetheless that we are limited, and not the constrainers of reality.

But while this feeling is undeniable, we can reason quite conclusively that it is misguided, assuming internalism is true. First, we should note that those speaking the impoverished version of English speak truly when they utter 'There are no facts which are structurally ineffable for us!' But this sentence does not mean what it means in English, and it does not mean that there are no facts which are structurally ineffable for them. These sentences have different truth conditions and mean different things in full English and impoverished English. Both are true, but only one means that there are no structurally ineffable facts, namely, the one in full English. Furthermore, we can conclude, given internalism, that no other creature can truly say that there are facts structurally ineffable for humans. They might utter sentences that sound like this, but these sentences would either not mean that or else they would not be true. We know, assuming internalism, that all facts are structurally effable for us, so no one can truly

[20] For a similar issue concerning replacing our naive concept of truth, since it leads to paradoxes, see Scharp (2013). For some critical remarks on such projects, see Hofweber (2010). Relatedly, one might hold with Priest (2002) that thinking about the limits of what can be expressed in one's own language also leads to numerous paradoxes, for example, König's paradox of the smallest undefinable number. Maybe the present argument for idealism relies on such connections to paradoxes, and is answered once the paradoxes are resolved. However, I see little justification for holding this. The argument given did not use anything like the usual paradox-inducing constructions; nor is it clear how solving paradoxes like König's paradox would relate to this argument.

say the opposite. And so, even though it seems at first plausible that other creatures can say something about us similar to what we can say about simpler creatures, we can reason conclusively, assuming internalism, that this feeling is misguided. We can truly say about the simple creatures that there are facts structurally ineffable for them, but no one can truly say that about us.

None of this should be taken to imply a form of relativism about facts. It is not to say that which facts there are is relative to a language, and that there might be fewer or more facts relative to poorer or richer languages. Some languages can be poorer than ours and represent fewer structures of facts, but no language can be richer, since we can already represent the structures of absolutely all facts. Instead there is only one totality of the facts, reality as all that is the case, but it is tied to our human representational capacities. It is not relativism, but idealism.

But maybe the advanced aliens can say something analogous about us to what we say about the simpler creatures, maybe not about facts, but about something else? Maybe they can state in some other way that we are limited. And, of course, often they would be correct. We are limited in many ways: we might not have the spaceships or the laser guns the aliens have, but such limitations are very different from the one that is at stake. We are limited in many ways, but are we limited when it comes to representing reality and stating the truth? The answer, at least concerning structure, is no, and no other limitation supersedes this. We cannot rationally accept that asking about something else, facts*, and our place among them is better than asking about facts. So, even though we are clearly limited in many ways, we are central where it counts. Internalism makes clear that the totality of facts is constrained by our human minds, and thus we are unlimited even though other creatures are not. A feeling of a relevant limitation surely remains, but we have good reasons to conclude that this feeling is misguided.

Instead of seeing internalism as a limitation that should be overcome, I would like to suggest that it gives us an insight into what reality is like. We did state the proper question all along when we asked whether we are central to reality and whether there can be structurally ineffable facts. Reality can be understood as the totality of facts, even if, and especially when, facts are not entities. So understood, reality is tied to us, since there are no structurally ineffable facts, in principle and for a reason, assuming internalism. That we asked this question concerning idealism by talking about facts is not undermined

by internalism about talk about facts. The question remains intact as the proper question. Instead of undermining the question, internalism points to its answer, and that answer is idealism. Instead of thinking of internalism as a limitation for what we can say, we should think of it as incorporating a metaphysical picture of the propositional or fact-like aspect of reality. This picture holds that what there is and what exists might well be simply there, with no involvement on our part. Facts obtain, but the totality of facts is not simply there waiting for us to represent them. Which facts obtain is not because of us, but the range of the facts which can in principle obtain is tied to us: they must be representable by a representation of the kind we have available.

This makes clear how ontological realism is compatible with alethic idealism. What there is is independent of us, but no matter what there is, it can only figure in facts with a structure matching our forms. And since we have forms like subject-predicate forms there is no tension between this kind of realism and that kind of idealism. Thinking about harmony makes clear how all this can coherently be so. The totality of facts range-depends on us, but facts do not truth-depend on us. This range-dependence holds because any fact that can obtain has to be representable with a thought of the form that our thoughts have, and this limits what reality can be like. Range-dependence is, in essence, the dependence requirement that arises from harmony being required. And thus thinking about the harmony of thought and reality leads to a sense of the dependence of reality on us and our minds, and with it to idealism.

This defence of idealism meets the constraints listed above in §2: it explicitly formulates idealism and whatever notion of dependence it might rely on, since range-dependences is explicitly stated. It is compatible with what we generally know to be true, since conceptual idealism does not hold that the obtaining of the facts depends on us; only the range of the facts does. And it can be supported with an argument: the argument from this paper together with a defence of internalism.

All this meets the goal we set for a defence of a strong form of idealism and a third answer to the big question about our place in the world. The overall metaphysics of all of reality will have to bring out this connection between us and reality. The metaphysical story of reality will have to mention us human beings in the main text, not just in a footnote. And thus we are metaphysically central to reality. Our minds are central, not because reality is mental or constructed by our minds, but because there is a guaranteed structural harmony between

which facts could in principle obtain and which facts can be represented by us. Our minds constrain reality without constructing it.

6. Conclusion

How such a version of idealism works more precisely as a metaphysics is largely left open by what I have said in this paper. This paper doesn't aim to work out the idealism that would follow, nor did it aim to defend internalism, which would imply it. My goal here was simply to argue that a strong anthropocentric form of idealism can be defended from an unexpected angle: via a defence of internalism, a position merely about what we do when we talk about facts. Even though the assumption in this argument is only about our own language, nonetheless substantial metaphysical consequences follow. The language–metaphysics gap can be overcome in this case, and metaphysical conclusions can be drawn from considerations about our own natural language alone. Whether the internalist position in the philosophy of language is correct is very much a substantial further question. But I do not take internalism simply to be a possible view that should be considered—I have defended it on grounds purely tied to considerations in the philosophy of language in other work, in particular in Hofweber (2016). The version of internalism defended there includes details that had to be skipped here, in particular concerning how to formulate the truth conditions for the inferential reading of quantifiers when we allow context-sensitive instances. This did not matter so much here, since we focused on structural harmony and the forms of our representations. These forms are not affected by context, only which facts can be represented with them, and so context could be set aside for present purposes. With a more thorough discussion of the inferential reading of the quantifier and of the notion of an ineffable fact, one can argue that all facts are effable in principle, and that our thought and reality are in complete harmony, not merely structural harmony. However, the details of this must be left for another occasion and require quite a bit more work.[21]

Whether internalism is in the end correct is a good question, one going far beyond this paper. What matters here is the connection between internalism and idealism, a connection across the allegedly insurmountable language–metaphysics gap. This connection does not support approaching metaphysics in general via the study of language.

[21] See Hofweber (forthcoming) for that occasion.

Many metaphysical issues have nothing to do with how we represent reality. But sometimes such a connection obtains. Sometimes thinking about how we represent the world can lead to substantial metaphysical consequences. When that is so is not at all clear from what we have seen, but even that this connection sometimes obtains might suggest at least a partial result for how to think about metaphysics, one tied to a more question-focused methodology. It suggests that thinking about the representations we employ in asking questions in metaphysics is a possible source of an answer to those questions. And whatever that answer might be, it does not take away from the question that it can be answered this way. The question does not lose its status as a fully factual and objective question simply because it was answered by thinking about the representations we employ in asking it. The question does not get deflated, but answered, by thinking about how we ask it and what function the representations we employ in it have. In this sense, such an approach is less neo-Carnapian, but more neo-Kantian. It affirms that thinking about how we represent reality is one, but only one, way to find out what reality is like. And fittingly, idealism is one result that can be achieved this way.[22]

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[22] My thanks to Paul Boghossian, David Chalmers, Matti Eklund, Krasimira Filcheva, Michael Friedman, Anja Jauernig, Alan Nelson, Ram Neta, Tobias Rosefeldt, Thomas Sattig, Robert Smithson, Nick Stang, and Helen Yetter-Chappell for discussing these issues with me. Special thanks to Anja Jauernig for comments at the Kant and Analytic Metaphysics conference in Toronto, Manish Oza for comments at the Intellect and Its Philosophical Limits conference in Vancouver, and Helen Yetter-Chappell for comments at the 14th NYU Conference on Issues in Modern Philosophy: Idealism in New York, as well as to three referees for this journal.

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