

Metaphysically-Inert Conceptual Idealism: A Critique of Hofweber on Facts and Effability

Robert Finan

Introduction

In this essay, I argue that ‘Conceptual Idealism’ (CI, henceforth), as defended by Thomas Hofweber, fails as a substantial metaphysical conclusion. That is, CI is metaphysically-inert, and any metaphysically-substantial reading of CI is unjustified by Hofweber’s arguments. I begin by briefly outlining CI and Hofweber’s arguments for this position, before arguing that CI does not have the metaphysical weight that Hofweber intends it to. I clarify this by highlighting Hofweber’s treatment of ‘facts’ in his response to the ‘impoverished speaker’ objection. I further demonstrate that in order to raise these issues with CI, one need not give any peculiar account of the quantification over facts. Ultimately, this essay culminates in establishing the metaphysical insignificance of the *structural effability thesis* (SET, henceforth) and subsequently of CI.

§1. Hofweber’s Conceptual Idealism

To better understand Hofweber and his conclusions, this section offers a brief overview of his terminology and of the points relevant to CI; their faults are then demonstrated in the following sections.

- ❖ **Strong Alethic Idealism:** Human minds are central to reality, when ‘reality’ is understood as the totality of facts.¹ (Hofweber 2023, pp.5–6, 16)
- ❖ **Internalism (about talk about facts):** When we (humans) talk about facts, fact-terms (‘that-p’, ‘the-fact-that-p’, &c.) do not generally aim to refer to entities. Quantifiers over fact-terms are ‘used in their inferential reading’. (Hofweber 2023, pp.72, 80)
- ❖ **Structural Ineffability:** “F is structurally ineffable [for humans] if none of ... [our] forms of representation ... are suitable to represent a fact with the structure of F”. (Hofweber 2023, p.65)
- ❖ **Range-dependence:** “[T]he totality of facts *range-depend*s on us [=humans] ... [iff] ... which facts can in principle obtain, is tied to us”. (Hofweber 2023, p.76)

Hofweber’s conclusions rely both on Internalism and the polysemy of quantifiers. His main contention is primarily a conditional one—that CI follows from Internalism—and thus, while these premises are by no means certain, I grant them for the purposes of this essay. As such, for our purposes, quantifiers have the following readings: the Domain Conditions Reading (DCR), wherein quantifiers range over the domain of all objects;² the Inferential Reading (IR), wherein quantifiers can be expanded into the conjunction/disjunction of all relevant expressions. (Hofweber 2023, pp.69–70; 2018, p.68) Thus, one expression in English might represent two entirely separate *meanings*. For example, ‘Something is a number’ (Num) can be read as follows:

¹ I cite only Hofweber’s most recent articulation of a particular claim, except in cases where multiple instances provide a fuller understanding of Hofweber’s view.

² This is similar to the Quinean, external account of quantification. (Quine 1948)

DCR $\exists x[N(x)]$
 where x represents any object, and N reads ‘is a number’.

IR $N(t_1) \vee N(t_2) \vee N(t_3) \vee \dots \ \&c.$

i.e., $\forall N(t)$

 where t represents any ‘singular expression’ in our language.³

For the above, Hofweber concludes—agreeing, to this extent, with Carnap—that on DCR Num is false, and on IR Num is trivially true. (Hofweber 2016, pp.15, 24–25) That is, on IR Num it is true though not a substantial metaphysical result. Hofweber later avoids the language of ‘triviality’ of IR, preferring to highlight the equal (factually-contentful) ‘status’ of both readings. (Hofweber 2023, p.70; 2016, p.25) However, when Hofweber says that “[DCR and IR] are simply two different readings of the same expression ... different, but equal readings”, we must remember that the *expression* is not our primary concern. (Hofweber 2023, p.70) Rather, what is more important for our discussion is the *meanings* of the expression, one of which is a linguistic proposition (IR) and one of which is a metaphysical proposition (DCR). Notationally, we can distinguish the meanings of some expression (F) as either DCR(F) or IR(F).

In order to establish CI, Hofweber asks the structural effability question:

(SE?) “Are there any structurally ineffable facts?” (Hofweber 2023, p.111)

He considers the following potential answers: (Hofweber 2023, p.74)

Structural Ineffability Thesis (~SET): “There are structurally ineffable facts”.

Structural Effability Thesis (SET): “Every fact is structurally effable”.

Hofweber argues that Internalism guarantees the truth of SET—which is also framed as the ‘structural harmony’ of minds and the world—and frames this as a ‘substantial result’. (Hofweber 2023, pp.75, 122) Additionally, Hofweber argues that facts do not exist—there are no entities called ‘facts’—and that quantifiers over fact-terms are used in IR. (Hofweber 2023, pp.108–109, 212) This entails, for example, that ‘All facts are true’ is commonly intended to mean $\wedge T(f)$. Ultimately, Hofweber concludes that CI—i.e., “[T]he version of [strong] alethic idealism which holds that reality as the totality of facts is range-dependent on us [=human minds]”—is a true and metaphysically-substantial conclusion; one which follows from Internalism by way of a ‘straightforward argument’. (Hofweber 2023, pp.76, 207; 2019, p.716)

§2. The Metaphysical-Triviality of The Structural Effability Thesis

In this section, I argue that SET—one of Hofweber’s most important conclusions for establishing CI—is metaphysically-inert, and thus does not support any metaphysically-

³ Notation: Hofweber 2023, p.72

substantial CI. Let us first consider, alongside Hofweber, some helpful examples: (Hofweber 2016, p.24; 2023, p.70)

Num “Something is a number”.

E “Everything exists”.

The meanings of these expressions are determined by the reading of their quantifiers. DCR(Num) is an external, metaphysical claim and IR(Num) is an internal, metaphysically-inert (mathematical) claim. Even in cases where IR seems more substantial than DCR, it remains a claim about *language* rather than metaphysics. For instance, DCR(E) is a trivially true *metaphysical* claim (that every existent thing is indeed existent) and IR(E) is a substantially false *language* claim (that all propositions of the form ‘t exists’ are true). (Hofweber 2023, pp.70–71) Compare these to Hofweber’s response to (SE?):

SET “Every fact is structurally effable”.

If we read SET as meaning IR(SET) (i.e., $\wedge F(t) \rightarrow E(t)$)⁴—and indeed, even if we disallow DCR over fact-terms altogether—then SET is metaphysically-inert.⁵ That is: ‘That-p is effable’ is a metaphysically-inert, internal claim about language (for any p). A conjunction of two metaphysically-inert claims is itself metaphysically-inert. IR(SET) is constructed by the repeated conjunction of ‘that-p is effable’ expressions. Thus, IR(SET) is itself metaphysically-inert. Alternatively, DCR(SET) (i.e., $\forall x[Fx \rightarrow Ex]$) is true, but this is because no facts whatsoever exist. Thus, DCR(SET) is no justification for CI, as no facts existing entails that neither effable nor ineffable facts exist.

Reframing IR(SET) as ‘the structural harmony of minds and facts’ *sounds* more substantial, but it is not so (as Hofweber equates the two). (Hofweber 2023, p.65) Thus, no metaphysical conclusion has yet been established. This becomes apparent by removing the ambiguous (metaphysical-seeming) English expression altogether. If we do not express IR(SET) as SET, then it is clear that IR(SET) is metaphysically-inert. As such, a more accurate (though infinitely tedious) English expression of IR(SET) would be ‘(that-p) is effable, and (that-q) is effable, ... &c.’ which is not (nor does it strike us as) metaphysically-substantial. We should not be fooled by appearances; labeling IR(SET) as SET does not make the meaning any more metaphysically-substantial. Therefore, if Hofweber is to allow for either reading of quantifiers (over fact-terms) then IR(SET) is metaphysically-inert, and DCR(SET) is metaphysically-substantial but does not support CI. This metaphysical triviality of IR(SET) is maintained even if we *necessarily* must read SET as meaning IR(SET). Thus, Hofweber’s SET can only justify a version of CI that is metaphysically-inert.⁶

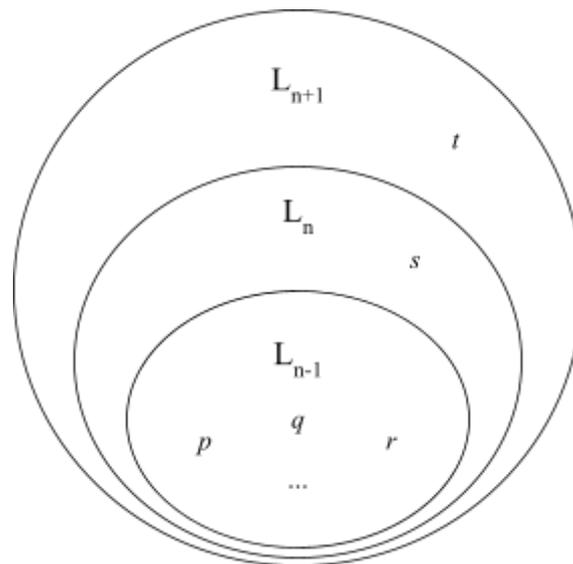
⁴ F(t) = ‘t is a fact’, E(t) = ‘t is structurally effable’, t is any singular expression. (Hofweber 2023, p.74)

⁵ Hofweber affirms that DCR and IR are always in principle available, though Internalism suggests the use of IR. (Hofweber 2023, pp.84, 108) I consider both readings to demonstrate that *neither* can serve CI.

⁶ An articulation of a metaphysically-inert, trivial CI can be found below (pp.5–6).

§3. A Revised Impoverished-Language Objection and Defining ‘Fact’

In this section I outline an altered version of ‘the impoverished-language objection’ (or the ‘alien objection’). (Nagel 1986, 95f; Hofweber 2023, p.85; 2019, p.728–9). This objection has substantial force independently, but I retool the argument here in order to—in conjunction with my previous objection—clarify CI and illuminate *how* Hofweber ends up defending a metaphysically-inert statement as though it is a substantial metaphysical conclusion. That is, I alter this objection to highlight exactly why Hofweber’s response to the traditional objection fails, and how Hofweber’s conception of ‘facts’ ties into CI’s metaphysical triviality.



Suppose our language (L_n) can represent n many facts. Consider the potential for a language that can express one less fact (L_{n-1}), and a language that can express one more fact (L_{n+1}). Hofweber acknowledges that an L_{n-1} (impoverished-English) speaker can truthfully say ‘There are no facts ineffable for L_{n-1} speakers’ (that is, as spoken in L_{n-1} , SET_{n-1}), but by ‘facts’ they mean something different than what L_n speakers mean by ‘facts’. He further acknowledges that it is therefore also true for us (L_n speakers) to say that there *is* some ‘fact’ (namely, s) that is ineffable for an L_{n-1} speaker. (Hofweber 2023, p.85) Similarly, an L_{n+1} speaker can theoretically point to a counterexample to SET_n (namely, t).⁷ If t *is* a fact, then SET_n is false, and thus Hofweber is forced to reject that t is a fact. Hofweber highlights that $\sim SET$ as spoken in L_{n+1} ($\sim SET_{n+1}$) would not mean $\sim SET$ as we understand it ($\sim SET_n$). (Hofweber 2023, pp.85–86) As there is no other relevant difference between any of the described languages, SET_{n-1} must differ from SET_n (and SET_{n+1}) as its meaning of ‘all facts’ is simply identical with ‘... p & q & r ’, whereas for an L_n speaker, ‘all facts’ means ‘... p & q & r & s ’. Thus, it seems that according to Hofweber’s use of the term, ‘facts’ in a given language are ‘that which corresponds to my language’s fact-terms’ or ‘effable facts’. In that

⁷ ‘SET’, as it has been used thus far, means SET_n

case, let us call what they ($=L_{n-1}$ speakers) are talking about when they say ‘facts’, facts_{n-1} . Similarly, when we ($=L_n$ speakers) say ‘facts’ we really mean facts_n , and t is not a fact_n . However, the furthering of this line of thought shows that just as s is a fact_n but not a fact_{n-1} , t is a fact_{n+1} (but not a fact_n). This clarification of Hofweber’s conception of ‘fact’ *again* highlights the metaphysical triviality of the conclusion he is committed to. That is, Hofweber’s CI is clarified thus:

Reality is range-dependent on our minds.

i.e., The totality of facts is range-dependent on our minds.

i.e., The totality of meanings of fact-terms is range-dependent on our minds.

i.e., The set of things we can truly state is limited by the set of things we can state.

Thus, for Hofweber, the substantial metaphysical conclusion he takes himself to be arguing for is something like ‘All facts are effable’—where ‘facts’ is *absolute* (... roughly, $\text{fact}_{n+\infty}$). However, for Hofweber, the expression ‘facts’ is used as facts_n and thus incorporates effability (in L_n) into his understanding of the term ‘fact’. This is highlighted further by Hofweber’s commitment to the idea that anything that might be said to be true (in L_{n+1}) but not representable in our language (namely, t) would not be a ‘fact’ (i.e., fact_n) at all. Thus his supposedly substantial conclusion, SET, becomes ‘All facts_n are effable (in L_n)’ which though true, is metaphysically inconsequential.

§4. Quantification and Metaphysical Weight

Typically, a critique of Hofweber’s CI—now clarified as meaning $\text{IR}(\text{CI}_n)$ —would be thought to require some alternative account of quantification. Indeed, the realism opposing CI—that Nagel defends—incurrs such a burden, for it is unclear how, on Hofweber’s account of quantification, one could coherently articulate the truth or possibility of $\sim\text{SET}$. (Hofweber 2023, pp.64–66; Nagel 1986, pp.90-91, 93) However, in this essay I do not defend any metaphysical position. My claim is rather that Hofweber’s purportedly metaphysical conclusion, $\text{IR}(\text{CI}_n)$, is in fact metaphysically-inert rather than outright false. As such, I am not committed to $\sim\text{SET}$ or any particular metaphysical stance. I do not claim that $\text{IR}(\text{CI}_n)$ is an incorrect metaphysical position, but rather that it is not a metaphysical claim at all; the appearance of the metaphysicality of $\text{IR}(\text{CI}_n)$ is an artifact of its expression (for example, in English). My main contention is that $\text{IR}(\text{CI}_n)$ —as well as $\text{IR}(\sim\text{SET}_n)$ and $\text{IR}(\text{SET}_n)$ —is metaphysically-inert. This conclusion depends on no particular reading of quantifiers, as it is a conclusion about a particular proposition ($\text{IR}(\text{CI}_n)$) not about an English expression (CI). In this case, (SE?) ceases to be a genuine metaphysical question at all, at least, not within Hofweber’s framework. Whether or not the metaphysical question, that (SE?) seems to be gesturing at, is a genuine question remains to be seen; but what has been demonstrated is that Hofweber’s framework only allows for it to be read either as non-metaphysical (i.e., $\text{IR}(\text{SE?}_n)$) or irrelevant to any potential metaphysical interpretation of CI (i.e., $\text{DCR}(\text{SE?}_n)$).

This places CI in an unfortunate position, wherein it is intended to be reaching a metaphysical conclusion through analysis of language alone, but it is in fact committed to a kind of de facto quietism about any genuine metaphysical question that (SE?) might represent. (Hofweber 2023, pp.67, 78; 2019, p.709)

In §3 I utilise a variation of a Nagelian argument, but I do not use said argument to reach realism as Nagel does; (Nagel 1986, p.95) this argument only serves to highlight Hofweber’s restrictive use of the term ‘fact’. As I deny that CI—that is, $IR(CI_n)$ —is a metaphysical conclusion at all, there is no need to commit to any peculiar account of quantification; we need only consider that $IR(CI_n)$ is true, but it is not relevant to metaphysics, and it is thus misleading to label it a form of ‘idealism’, or express it with ‘CI’.⁸

Conclusion

This essay argues that the CI that Hofweber defends is metaphysically-inert. Ultimately, the objections presented in this essay serve to clarify Hofweber’s articulation of CI and related conclusions, which now read as the following, ultimately metaphysically inert claims:

SET	“All facts are structurally effable”
<i>means</i> $IR(SET_n)$	$\forall\varphi, s. t. \varphi \in S, \varphi$ is effable for L_n speakers, wherein S is the set of all true statements in L_n .
CI	“The totality of all facts range-depends on our minds”
<i>means</i> $IR(CI_n)$	S range-depends on L_n .

SET is metaphysically-inert and thus only supports a similarly inert CI. If one was to reformulate CI as metaphysically-substantial, this would be unsupported by Hofweber’s arguments. Therefore, CI, as defended by Hofweber, is metaphysically-inert and thus fails to do the theoretical work intended for it. The purportedly metaphysical position, CI, is revealed to be an internal, linguistic claim. Internalism (about talk about facts) does not commit one to metaphysical idealism.

⁸ For further discussion on the relationship between expressibility (of \sim SET) and truth potential, see: (Hofweber 2024; Kaplan 1989; Boyle 1972; Bonney 1966; Mackie 1964)

Wordcount

2500

(Body, 2347; Footnotes, 143; Diagram, 10)

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