

# Modesty, Esotericism and Ineffability: Remarks on Hofweber\*

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## 1. Introduction

Thomas Hofweber's *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics* (2016) contains lots of interesting and challenging ideas and arguments, together amounting to an original, systematic, well-argued perspective on metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Hofweber's work is a highly significant contribution to the contemporary metaphysical discussion.

Some parts of Hofweber's book are devoted to consideration of specific ontological questions – about natural numbers, properties, and propositions, and about ordinary objects. Other parts are devoted to more a more general discussion of ontology and the title of the book, *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics*, relates to those parts. Hofweber uses the conclusions of the specific discussions to help support the more general claims.

Already Hofweber's discussions of the specific ontological disputes are of great significance. But I will here focus on his general discussion of ontology. For the purposes of my discussion, I will not question whether Hofweber is right about what he says regarding natural numbers, properties and propositions.

Central to Hofweber's discussion is a distinction between what he calls internalism and externalism. Internalism about a given discourse is, roughly, the view that the (apparent) singular terms in the discourse are used non-referentially and the quantifiers are used nonobjectually. Externalism about a discourse is, roughly, the view that the singular terms in the discourse are used referentially and the quantifiers are used objectually. What Hofweber argues with respect to his main cases, natural numbers, properties and propositions, is in each case of the same form: in both ordinary and scientific X-discourse, X-terms are not referential, and standard quantification in X-discourse is of the internalist kind. The arguments are linguistic in nature, appealing to particular features of how sentences belonging to the relevant discourses function. Let me just briefly indicate the nature of Hofweber's arguments. Take a sentence like "The number of moons of Jupiter is four". Philosophers tend to think that this sentence requires the existence of numbers for its truth.

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<sup>1</sup> In the following, references will be to this book except where otherwise noted.

But Hofweber argues that this is based on a misunderstanding of how this sentence works. The sentence has a focus effect, and this arises from the syntax, without special intonation. The effect is like that of an utterance of “Jupiter has four moons” with phonetic stress on “four”. In this way “The number of moons of Jupiter is four” differs from ordinary identity sentences of the form “the number of Fs is G”. The best diagnosis is that “The number of moons of Jupiter is four” is not actually an identity sentence at all but must receive another analysis; and “four” in this sentence does not function semantically the way ordinary singular terms do.

Where internalism is true of X-discourse, we can meaningfully externally quantify over Xs but for principled reasons there are no Xs in the external sense. It may be useful to compare fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes. Given one standard and plausible story about fictional discourse, it holds that given that Sherlock Holmes is introduced as a fictional character, for principled reasons no actual or possible non-fictional entity could be Sherlock Holmes – even if some actual or possible non-fictional entity lived on Baker Street, played the violin, used cocaine, etc. Similarly, given Hofweber’s view, for natural numbers and the rest. Even if there exist entities with the features we associate with these entities, that is not sufficient for these entities to exist.

Hofweber’s general conclusions about ontology are based in part on his discussion of natural numbers, properties and propositions. In broadest outline, this is the picture of ontology defended by Hofweber. Some purported ontological questions, like those over the existence of natural numbers, properties and propositions, can be settled by linguistic means: and these entities do exist in the internalist sense but not in the externalist sense. Other purported ontological questions are answered by science. There is precious little for ontology as a separate branch of philosophy to do. (I will later characterize the view more carefully.)

Getting into a bit more detail, Hofweber seeks to defend a conception of metaphysics as “ambitious, yet modest” (chapter 12). This harks back to his (2009) paper “Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics”. (Ever since I first saw that description I have wanted to find it within me to defend something deserving the label unambitious yet immodest metaphysics.) Metaphysics should be *modest* through respecting mathematics and the mature sciences (296). It should be *ambitious* in that it should have some questions of its own left to answer (297). If metaphysics could legitimately be immodest it could clearly have its own questions to answer: it could offer answers that rival those of the mature sciences. And if metaphysics could legitimately be *esoteric* – if its domain could legitimately be “defined with primitive, new metaphysical terms that can’t be spelled out in a more accessible way” (314; more on this later) – it could clearly be ambitious and have questions of its own, for questions could be stated using the technical terms of metaphysics. For example, while leaving it to the mature sciences to decide what is the case, it could concern itself with what is *metaphysically* the

case (or what is *fundamentally* the case, or what is the case *in reality*). But by Hofweber's lights metaphysics shouldn't be esoteric. I will later return to his reasons. On Hofweber's preferred conception, metaphysics is *egalitarian* in that it "has the questions in its domain defined in generally accessible terms" (321).

Since metaphysics shouldn't be esoteric, there is a question of how it can be ambitious yet modest. Hofweber's answer is that in the case of ontology, it can be ambitious exactly in the cases where internalism is true. The arguments that things like natural numbers, properties and propositions do not exist in an external sense are distinctly philosophical in character. This is a rather unambitious form of ambitiousness, both since the arguments for this internalist view have to do with language and are not of a traditional metaphysical kind, and since (as Hofweber emphasizes) in every case Hofweber discusses where metaphysics is claimed to be ambitious, the answer to the external existence question is in the negative.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. What the case studies show

Suppose Hofweber is in fact right about natural numbers, properties and propositions. (And obviously his conclusions here are of great interest in their own right.) What should we conclude from this regarding ontology in general? Although Hofweber by no means claims that his general view on ontology follows, it may still be useful to pause on this question.

Well, an obvious first reaction to this question is: since there is lots else to ontology, no interesting general conclusion can be drawn. For one thing there is the question of ordinary objects. As mentioned, Hofweber devotes a chapter to that, and I will get to what he says about that issue. But there are also lots of other ontological debates. To rattle off just a few, there are disputes concerning sets, real numbers, simples/gunk, all sorts of 'weird objects' (like arbitrary mereological sums),... Nothing Hofweber says about his main cases immediately yields anything about these other cases, for the arguments appeal to specific features of the discourses in question.

Moreover, even if Hofweber is completely right about his main cases, it is an immediate consequence of the story he tells that even if for principled reasons there are no Xs in the external sense, it can still be that there are some entities that do exist in the external sense – call them the X\*s – that have the features we centrally ascribe to Xs. (Recall the Sherlock Holmes comparison.<sup>3</sup>) However, it may be thought that even if this issue is left open, it is not

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<sup>2</sup> Ontology is just one part of metaphysics. Hofweber sometimes discusses ontology, and sometimes metaphysics. There are things to discuss here, both about how representative ontology is for metaphysics as a whole, and about to what extent Hofweber draws conclusions about metaphysics generally from assumptions about ontology. But there is no space to get into that here, and I will do my best to sweep ontology vs metaphysics issues under the rug.

<sup>3</sup> Hofweber does compare a community that does arithmetic much like we do but who employ external quantification over "numbers" – and holds that their "numbers" aren't our numbers and their "arithmetic" is not arithmetic. (169f)

a very interesting issue, for two reasons. First, even if X\*s were to exist they would not be philosophically interesting: for we are concerned with natural numbers, properties and propositions, and not some supposed cousins thereof. Second, surely our belief that it is likely that there are things with the central features of Xs derives from a belief that there are Xs; given that there aren't Xs, we have no reason to believe there are X\*s. But I believe both these considerations can be problematized. As for the first: some traditional reasons for believing in properties do not overtly have to do with features of property talk, but have to do with the sense that identity in diversity must be theoretically explained somehow. One can postulate something property-like for the purpose of such an explanation. This relates also to the second point, for if something property-like is reasonably postulated for explanatory purposes, then the reasons for believing in something property-like are not dependent on believing that there strictly speaking are properties.

Hofweber does critically discuss these other reasons for postulating property-like entities (ch. 11). I will not attempt to evaluate his arguments here. In fact, I am sympathetic to much of what he says. My point is just that this is a crucial supplement to the linguistic arguments that Hofweber develops at greater length.

### **3. Ambition and modesty**

As mentioned, Hofweber defends a conception of metaphysics as “ambitious, yet modest”. In this section I will discuss this.

Hofweber centrally distinguishes between “overlap cases” and “non-overlap cases”, where “Fs are an overlap case if finding out whether there are Fs is of interest to metaphysics, and talk about Fs also occurs in another, authoritative part of inquiry”. (303) He holds that “[i]f externalism is true about talk about Fs, and Fs are an overlap case, then the ontological question about Fs is not in the domain of modest metaphysics.” (304) Given the modesty of metaphysics, the only overlap cases in the domain of metaphysics are ones where internalism is true. Hofweber states that “assuming modesty and overlap”, the following thesis holds:

*Autonomy without Freedom:* There are ontological questions that are in the domain of metaphysics, but whenever that is so, the answer is guaranteed to be in the negative.  
(320)

This is the unambitious ambitiousness mentioned above. In light of all this, Hofweber describes as “the core project of ontology” that of finding out “whether internalism or externalism is true for talk about Fs” (306). And the method for this core project is that of studying “language and mind”, and “we won't employ a distinctly metaphysical method” for this core project. All this sounds very dramatic and exciting. The core project of ontology is

that of answering a question about language and mind; and ontology is autonomous only in cases where the answers to the ontological questions are guaranteed to be negative.

But perhaps curiously, given Hofweber's talk of ontology's "core project", there is the above-mentioned "assuming...overlap" qualification: he *allows* that there are "many" non-overlap cases, where modesty plays no role, and for cases where "the existence of Fs is not immediately implied or ruled out by the other authoritative parts of inquiry", "the ontological questions are completely left open by what we have said so far". (305) (However, the only actual illustration Hofweber pauses on of what would be a non-overlap case of the relevant kind is that of God; and he even expresses doubts regarding whether this really is a non-overlap case. (Ibid.))<sup>4</sup>

In Hofweber's discussion one finds radical slogans about "the core project of ontology" which seem to be falsified by the non-overlap cases. Then there is the more circumscribed claim that emerges as the claim Hofweber really wants to defend, according to which the "core project" is a core project for some parts of ontology only, and these parts may be swamped by other parts. To stress, already the more circumscribed thesis has considerable significance, but it is much more, well, modest than some of Hofweber's rhetoric suggests. (*Parts of ontology and the ambitions of parts of metaphysics* would have been a less seductive title for Hofweber's book.)

Just how significant the existence of non-overlap cases is depends on how important the non-overlap cases are. Although I do not see Hofweber really pause to argue the point, I take it that he must be relying on the assumption that these non-overlap cases are somehow not very frequent, or not very central, or not very important.

#### **4. The demand for modesty**

What is supposed to justify modesty in the first place? Hofweber says: "The success of the field of mathematics is so great and the success of philosophy in settling questions of fact so slim in comparison that it would be absurd to expect that we can outright reject the results of the former because of one's preferred view on the latter". (294) In this connection he refers to Lewis (1991), who memorably made the point by saying "How would *you* like the job of telling the mathematicians that they must change their ways, and abjure countless errors, now that *philosophy* has discovered that there are no classes?"<sup>5</sup> The general lesson being

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<sup>4</sup> As Hofweber notes, we should focus on the *non-conflict* cases rather than *non-overlap* cases. For metaphysics can employ a notion F such that although other domains of inquiry don't employ that notion, these domains of inquiry provide answers to F-questions. ("No other discipline might use the term "entity". Nonetheless, the ontological question of whether there are any entities is not in the domain of metaphysics, since an answer is immediately implied by almost any part of inquiry" (305).)

<sup>5</sup> Lewis (1991), p. 59.

that when philosophy and a successful science conflict, it isn't science that is in the wrong. But there are complications here that Hofweber does not pause on. Mathematicians say and write things. Arguably, we philosophers should be deferential and accept them. But what does acceptance amount to here? Accepting something does not always mean accepting the sentence uttered as literally true.

Fictionalism illustrates the distinction.<sup>6</sup> I can be a *hermeneutic* fictionalist and take the mathematicians' statements in fact to be about what is going on in a certain fiction. If so, I can be modest towards the mathematicians in that I accept the claims they put forward – I believe that they truly describe the relevant fiction – even though I don't take the sentences they utter to be literally true. Or I can be a *revolutionary* fictionalist and hold that whatever may be the case regarding actual mathematical discourse, mathematical statements ought to be made in a fictional spirit: even if mathematicians don't actually mean to be talking about what holds in a certain fiction, that is overall the most reasonable way to use and understand mathematical statements. This is less modest – perhaps too immodest for Hofweber's taste. However, not even the revolutionary fictionalist is (to relate back to the Lewis passage above) in the unenviable position of telling the mathematicians that they must change their ways and abjure errors. Instead she is proposing a revisionary account of what it is that the mathematicians tell us. In their job qua mathematicians they arrive at conclusions about which mathematical claims to, in some sense, *put forward*. And presumably the philosopher shouldn't meddle with that. But maybe, for all that, the mathematician's mathematical competence does not put her in a position to rationally decide whether the seemingly ontologically committing claims should be put forward as literally true or in a fictional spirit. Paraphrasing Yablo (2000): a speaker may be more reasonably certain that she is getting at *something* right than she is about whether she is most reasonably understood as speaking literally or fictionally.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Esoteric and egalitarian metaphysics

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<sup>6</sup> See Eklund (2015) for an overview of fictionalism. Daly and Liggins (2011, p. 327) make a point similar to that I am making in the main text.

<sup>7</sup> Yablo (2000, p. 22of):

Isn't this in fact our common condition? When people say that the number of apostles is twelve, that rainbows are due to refraction, that Karl Marx had some influential ideas, or that Richard Nixon had a stunted superego, they are far more certain that *S* is getting at *something* right than that the thing it is getting at is the proposition that *S*, as some literalist might construe it. If numbers exist, then yes, we are content to regard ourselves as having spoken literally. If not, then the claim was *that there were twelve apostles*. If Freud was right, then yes, Nixon had a superego and it really was stunted. If not, then the claim was (more or less) that Nixon had trouble telling when a proposed course of action was morally wrong.

Another theme in Hofweber's discussion is the contrast between "esoteric" and "egalitarian" metaphysics. Hofweber thinks metaphysics should be egalitarian. But what is supposed to be bad about esoteric metaphysics? Hofweber lays out the reasons using the example of metaphysics being concerned with what is "metaphysically" the case rather than with what simply is the case. He thinks the project has "insufficient value" (who cares?), and "insufficient content" (how are these novel, primitive notions supposed to get their meaning?) (315).

An immediate tempting response to Hofweber is that metaphysics like other theoretical disciplines must be allowed to use technical terms, and technical terms that are genuine conceptual innovations, not exhaustively characterizable in familiar terms. However, it becomes clear later in Hofweber's discussion that he does think theoretical terms can have their place in metaphysics. He discusses David Lewis's (1983) argumentative strategy for introducing his notion of naturalness, and says that although he does not agree with Lewis, he finds Lewis's strategy perfectly reasonable (322fn13). But if undefined theoretical terms are sometimes all right, then what is supposed to be bad about esoteric metaphysics?

One idea in the general vicinity of what Hofweber is talking about is that technical terms are all right when they are introduced in *answers* to questions asked in non-egalitarian terms, but not when the *questions* are stated using esoteric terms. But this is not exactly Hofweber's idea and that is a good thing: for surely once a technical term is introduced, perhaps in an answer to a question posed in egalitarian terms, it is fine to go on asking questions stated employing the technical term. A better suggestion is that the technical term must have been, or perhaps could have been, *introduced* in an answer to an egalitarian question and not simply in a question. But such a suggestion, even assuming it is correct, does not seem useful as criticism of any part of metaphysical inquiry: for establishing that technical terms employed could not have not been introduced in response to antecedent theoretical pressure would be a tall order. It is not sufficient to show that some philosopher using the technical term does not introduce it in answers to questions. What must be shown that the terms and the concepts they express couldn't have their origin in reasonable questions posable in independent terms.

A recurring theme in Hofweber's discussion of esoteric metaphysics is that it is bad if the very *subject matter* of metaphysics is characterized in esoteric terms. Consider again Hofweber's characterization of being esoteric: metaphysics is esoteric if its domain "is defined with" primitive metaphysical terms "that can't be spelled out in a more accessible way". The "defined with" turns out to be crucial. While Hofweber deems Lewis's strategy to be fine, Sider's (2011) later employment of Lewis's notion of naturalness (or "structure", in

Sider's preferred terminology<sup>8</sup>) to characterize metaphysics as the project of figuring out "what the fundamental structure of the world is like" is dismissed as illegitimate. But here I have a hard time seeing what the substantive issue is supposed to be. If the terms Sider uses to ask his questions are in order, which they apparently are for all Hofweber argues (since Hofweber is fine with Lewis's strategy), then Hofweber cannot have a problem with the questions themselves. So the problem has to do with what "characterizes" metaphysics. But that latter question seems to be a boring taxonomical question. Nothing of substance regarding the legitimacy of the questions Sider poses can reasonably be held to turn on whether we individuate subject matters finely so that they constitute their own subject matter, or whether we instead individuate them more coarsely so that they only constitute a proper part of some subject matter.

When discussing esoteric metaphysics, Hofweber also brings up the issue of accessibility to outsiders. He says that if the domain of metaphysics is defined with "primitive...terms that can't be spelled out in a more accessible way", then this

...turns metaphysics into a discipline for insiders, with no access to those who are on the outside. You need to be a metaphysician to be able to grasp what questions metaphysics is supposed to answer. If you can't grasp the defining questions, you won't be able to figure out what metaphysics is supposed to do, and so you won't be able to join in. Only insiders are on the in, outsiders must stay out. (314)

But first, just to stress the point about the irrelevance of domain individuation: if some questions are inaccessible to outsiders, they are so whether or not they are held to characterize some discipline. If (say) "grounding", as this term is used in metaphysics, is inaccessible to outsiders, then that is as much of a problem regarding questions about grounding whether or not the term is held to characterize the domain of metaphysics. Second, how is inaccessibility supposed to enter in to begin with? Somehow or other one can come to grasp a primitive term. For all Hofweber says, metaphysicians have somehow come to grasp them.<sup>9</sup> Then it must be possible for an erstwhile outsider to come to grasp them too. Each of us metaphysicians was an outsider once. Not all learning of the meanings of new expressions comes by way of providing an equivalent formulation employing only old expressions.

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<sup>8</sup> There are some differences between Lewis's "naturalness" and Sider's "structure", but they do not appear relevant in the context – and Hofweber does not bring them up.

<sup>9</sup> On some anti-metaphysical views, not even metaphysicians grasp metaphysical terms: these terms are just meaningless or incoherent. But Hofweber does not seem to hold anything this radical (although some remarks seem to point in that direction, like the remarks about the technical terms of metaphysics having "insufficient content" (315)).



## 6. Ordinary objects

Hofweber argues that perception “defeasibly entitles us to believe” that there are ordinary objects, not just simples arranged ordinary object-wise (192). He then proceeds to consider two different sorts of questions. The first is whether there is reason to, after closer inspection, distrust this evidence (whether the evidence is “undercut”). He concludes not. After this he turns to a different question: whether there is other evidence which overrides the perceptual evidence in favor of ordinary objects. His view is that there is not. He brings up causal overdetermination arguments against ordinary objects, of the kind employed in Merricks (2001), but says “the balance strikes me to go clearly in favor of the empirical evidence” (201).

The role of the discussion of ordinary objects in Hofweber’s book is to illustrate that metaphysics is often unimportant. He considers the view that “one needs metaphysical theorizing” (185) to settle whether ordinary objects exist, and rejects this view:

The question of whether ordinary objects exist and whether some things at least sometimes compose something is an empirical question, and we have lots of empirical evidence for an affirmative answer in both cases. (185)

Hofweber makes significant points in the discussion, about the perceptual evidence we have in favor of there being ordinary objects, and about what it takes to undercut this evidence. But in the wider dialectical context, his moves strike me as strange, for two reasons.

First, a quick gripe: while Hofweber’s discussion is generally careful, the seemingly crucial statement about the *balance* of evidence is made dogmatically, without much argument. Second, Hofweber’s aim is to show that the issue is empirical, in such a way that one does not need metaphysical theorizing to settle the issue. But even assuming that Hofweber is indeed right about the balance of evidence, that is not to say that the metaphysical theorizing somehow fails to be relevant. If I consider whether  $p$  and there is one type of evidence,  $e$ , in favor of  $p$ , and another type of evidence,  $e^*$ , in favor of  $\sim p$ , then even if on balance I should accept that  $p$ , that does not immediately mean that one did not after all have to consider evidence  $e^*$  in favor of  $\sim p$  in order to settle the question. Compare: to establish whether the defendant is guilty one may need to consider some seemingly relevant evidence even if by the end of the day it turns out to carry little weight. (Talk of *needing* such-and-such theorizing can amount to many things. Perhaps Hofweber thinks metaphysical theorizing is not “needed” in this case since we have enough evidence for the truth of the matter even if we do not consider metaphysical arguments. But that seems to rely on setting the bar for “needing” some theorizing a bit high.)

A natural response to these last considerations is to say that if we are to decide whether to go with what metaphysics tells us or with what perception and science tell us, then it really is pretty obvious that the reasonable choice is the latter. And metaphysical theorizing is not “needed”, for it is pretty clear in advance of the theorizing that going with perception and science is more rational. But if this response seems natural and obvious it is because one does not distinguish between different ways of rejecting the deliverances of perception and science. There is the kind of rejection that involves a radical or indiscriminate rejection of all sorts of aspects of what perception and science deliver; then there is the kind of rejection that for specific reasons denies one aspect of what perception and science deliver. Importantly, metaphysics typically involves only the second kind of rejection. Consider a metaphysician who is a nihilist, saying that there are no complex material objects, so when the Ks are purported complex material objects there are no Ks but only simples arranged K-wise. This metaphysician can say that perception and science in many ways get it right, just as the revolutionary fictionalist with respect to mathematics can agree that mathematicians in many ways get things right. In each case, what is proposed is quite distinct from just throwing out the relevant bits of science. Even if Hofweber is right about the evidence for there being ordinary objects, it can for example be that scientific theories as actually formulated, quantifying over ordinary objects, are overall no more theoretically virtuous (explanatory, etc.) than are the theories modified so as to be compatible with what our nihilist says – and the theories so modified are in many ways like the unmodified theories.

## 7. Ineffability

In this last section I will turn to a different kind of issue. In chapter 10, Hofweber considers the question of whether there are *ineffable facts* – in the sense of facts which we cannot express – and considers this question from the perspective both of externalism and of internalism about proposition- and fact-talk. He argues that given externalism about such talk, there is very good reason to think that there are ineffable facts. We have built-in cognitive limitations. And just as there are facts which are ineffable for less advanced creatures than us, it is reasonable to think that there are facts that are ineffable for us but which could be expressed by more advanced creatures. But given internalism, Hofweber’s preferred view, things stand differently. The *effability thesis* is the statement that everything is effable, and this statement is true given internalism. Hofweber notes that “The quantifier here ranges over propositions, facts, or truths, but in any case, over the propositional broadly understood” (264). But then “If internalism is true about quantification over the propositional, then, on the simple formulation of internalism, this statement is equivalent to

the conjunction over all the instances, that is, all the instances in our language...and this conjunction is true, since each conjunct is true" (264).

Early in the chapter, Hofweber argues that

ineffable facts aren't just those that involve objects that we might have a hard time referring to, say unusual abstract objects, or material objects outside of our light cone, or what have you. Any alien who can represent a fact involving an unusual object *o*, say the fact that *o* is unusual, can help us represent that fact as well, by allowing us to piggyback on the aliens' representation of *o*, i.e. their name for *o*. In general we are able to exploit the referential abilities of others to expand our representational repertoire. (252f)

Based on these considerations Hofweber concludes that

...the interesting notion of the ineffable is object permitting: conceptual representations of particular objects are not a relevant limitation...we can for present purposes grant that we can have a representation of any object, via a name for that object. The real worry is that there are some facts that require a representation of a completely different kind than we can have. (253)

(This relates to some complications Hofweber brings up in connection with internalism. He thinks the "simple" formulation of internalism is in fact too simple. But given the object-permitting notion of effability, even a properly formulated internalism vindicates the effability thesis. (265))

Hofweber's discussion of these issues is very rich and interesting and I am here barely able to scratch the surface. But let me mention two concerns.

First, recall the Sherlock Holmes-point from above. Even if internalism is true about F-talk and so it is trivially true that in the externalist sense that there are no Fs, this leaves it open that in the externalist sense that are quite F-ish things. Even if the effability thesis is true as stated, it can be that there (externalistically) are quite fact-like facts\* and some of these are ineffable. Hofweber brings up this kind of thing but his response boils down to the point that "[t]ruth\*, whatever it is supposed to be, isn't truth, and content\* isn't content" (268). This is of course correct as far as it goes, but leaves open the crucial question of whether content\* may be sufficiently content-ish that an ineffability thesis stated concerning ineffable content\*s remains of significant interest, and captures something fundamental about the relationship between language and the world.

Second, I wish to make a remark on what Hofweber says holds given externalism. Hofweber's reasoning in favor of taking the interesting notion of the ineffable to be object-permitting appears to generalize. He thinks that (on an externalist view) we can refer to any *objects* that the aliens refer to, but that the aliens could represent *facts* of a completely different kind than we can represent. But suppose the aliens use "flebeleb gada gada strotsch" for some fact we supposedly cannot represent. Then we can refer to that fact as well, piggybacking on the aliens' representation: "the fact the aliens refer to as 'flebeleb gada gada sprotsch'". Of course it may be held that the central way of representing facts isn't that of *referring* to them but that of using sentences that stand in some other kind of semantic relation to them. Call that relation *expression*. This doesn't matter. Our stipulation could then be: "let 'S' be a sentence expressing that fact which 'flebeleb gada gada sprotsch' expresses". 'S' is a simple expression whose meaning isn't compositionally determined from the meanings of some simpler parts but that doesn't prevent it from being a meaningful sentence, and one expressing this fact that the aliens express.<sup>10</sup>

This is a problem for Hofweber. Unless there is a way for him to treat the case of objects and the case of facts differently, he must either deny that we can piggyback on the aliens when it comes to reference to non-facts (something he rightly deems implausible), or allow that we can piggyback on them also when it comes to reference to facts. This complication does not affect his case that given internalism, the effability thesis holds. But it does affect his argument that given externalism there are ineffable facts, and hence also his case for the view that the question of the truth of internalism is pivotal as far as the effability thesis is concerned. The effability thesis holds even given externalism, so long as there are some ways, even though indirect, of picking out facts through definite descriptions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In his (2017), Hofweber brings up a suggestion that can seem equivalent to that I bring up in the text: using a truth predicate and the name of a proposition one can, due to the equivalence between proposition *p* and the proposition that *p* is true, always express any proposition. As against this suggestion, Hofweber notes that even though there is an equivalence of sorts between proposition *p* and the proposition that *p* is true, one may still not be able to say that *p* by saying that the proposition that *p* is true. But however it may be with that, the example in the text does not involve going via a truth predicate.

<sup>11</sup> Of course it is not a given that this condition is satisfied. Some relevant complications are mentioned in my (2007).

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