

INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY AND THE LIMITS OF CONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATION

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Abstract: This paper investigates the connection of intellectual humility to a somewhat neglected form of a limitation of human knowledge—a limitation in which facts or truths we human beings can in principle represent conceptually. I consider some arguments for such a limitation, and argue that, under standard assumptions, the sub-algebra hypothesis is the best hypothesis about how the facts we can represent relate to the ones that we can not. This hypothesis has a consequence for intellectual humility in that it supports it in metaphysics, but not in ordinary inquiry.

1 Intellectual Humility and Ignorance

In general, the aptness of humility in any domain is connected to what reasons we have for thinking that we are limited in that domain. Realizing my own limitations is one, but not the only, source of the appropriateness of humility. Knowing about my limitations as a musician or athlete supports being humble about the upcoming performance or game. Similarly, intellectual humility is tied to what reasons we have for thinking that we are limited in our intellectual endeavors. If we have reason to think that our minds are limited in certain intellectual ways, then humility in that domain is a likely consequence. One of our most central intellectual endeavors is to gain knowledge of what the world is like. We use our intellects, amongst others, to come to know about the world. If we had reason to think that we are systematically limited in what we can come to know then intellectual humility would *prima facie* appear to be a consequence. But to what extent and in what form more precisely we should be humble is left open by all this, but it is significant for our assessment of our own position as knowers and of what we think we have found out about the world. What conclusions for humility we should draw will depend on how and to what extent we had reason to think that we are limited in what we can come to know.¹ In this paper I hope to explore one route for assessing the

¹ For more on this issue, with a particular emphasis on Kant, see [Langton 1998](#).

aptness and extent of intellectual humility in light of a particular somewhat neglected possible source of a limitation to knowledge. Instead of focusing on the well-known possible limitation to knowledge tied to skepticism and directly to epistemological consideration, I will focus on a limitation to knowledge connected to the limits of what we human beings can represent conceptually. Thus, our topic is how the limits of what we can think affect what we can know.

Our knowledge has two main sources of a possible limitation connected to two different achievements that are required to come to know something. To come to know that p , we need to do two things successfully. First, we need to represent the fact that p in thought. We need a conceptual representation, the kind of representation required for knowledge, with content that p . Second, we need to have sufficient evidence or other good epistemic standing for this representation. We need good reason to think that this representation indeed represents the world correctly. To come to know that p , we need to do both of these two rather different things. Both of them can be beyond what we human beings can do, and thus there are two sources of a limitation to knowledge: one tied to a limit of what we can represent conceptually, and another tied to a limit of what we can have good reason to take to be a correct representation. The first limitation is thus representational, the second more narrowly epistemic. The second limitation to knowledge is the focus of traditional skeptical concerns about knowledge. Even when we can represent some facts, we might not be able to have good enough reasons to hold that this representation is correct. Our focus here will be what reasons we have to think that we are limited in what facts we can represent conceptually—that is, represent in thought or language.

When we do not know something we are ignorant of that thing. Ignorance of a fact or a truth can be perfectly harmless. I don't know how much change is in my wallet, but I could easily find out. Such cases of ignorance are simply cases of *de facto ignorance*—something that I don't know, but might well find out. But sometimes our ignorance runs deeper and then it might be less harmless. Some cases of ignorance are such that we are bound to remain ignorant in these cases. There are some facts that we are ignorant of in a way that we can't overcome. For example, is the number of T. Rex that ever lived odd or even? One of them is the answer, but we will never be able to find out which one. There is not enough evidence around any more to allow us to come to know the answer. Still, we can ask the question, and we can realize that an answer to this question is beyond what we can still hope to find sufficient evidence for. I will call cases of ignorance like these *insurmountable epistemic ignorance*, or epistemic ignorance for short, since the source of the ignorance is more narrowly epistemic (i.e., a lack of evidence) and we can't overcome it given our situation. But ignorance can run even deeper than that. Some facts might be beyond us in that we cannot even ask the question whether these facts obtain. We can ask the

question whether the number of T. Rex is odd, although we won't be able to know what the answer is. But there might be some facts where we can't ask the question whether they obtain, and we can't even state the answer that they obtain. These would be facts we can't represent in thought or language. Obviously, I can't give an example of such a fact, at least not explicitly, but we might still have reason to think that this is our situation. Any such case we can call a case of *deep ignorance*. Our concern here is whether we have reason to think that we are deeply ignorant of some facts, and if so what this would mean for intellectual humility. But before making the connection to humility clearer, we will need to look a bit more at how to understand deep ignorance.

Deep and epistemic ignorance arise from the two possible limitations to knowledge discussed above: epistemic and representational. If I can represent a fact in thought or language, then I can ask whether this fact obtains, and I can say that it does or does not obtain. Deep ignorance is thus tied to the representational limitation to knowledge. Epistemic ignorance, on the other hand, is tied to the epistemic limitation to knowledge. That we are limited epistemically in a limited range of cases is uncontroversial, I take it. There are some facts that we will never be able to come to know, even though we can represent them: the number of T. Rex, the number of grains of sand on earth right now, and so on. Whether we are epistemically limited in a large range of cases, including whether I have hands, whether there is a table in front of me, and so on, is widely debated in epistemology in connection with skepticism. The epistemic limitation to knowledge is of course also connected to intellectual humility, besides the representational one, which is our focus. Our local epistemic limitation implies local humility. My realizing that I will never be able to know whether the number of T. Rex is odd or even has implications for what proclamations I should make on the matter. If epistemic ignorance is widespread, since skepticism is correct and I do not know that I have hands even if I do, then the consequences for humility will be more widespread as well. I will not discuss skepticism and epistemic limitations to knowledge here. They are widely discussed, and just as it is widely accepted that we are locally epistemically limited, so it is widely agreed that skepticism is false and we are not globally limited, although it is controversial where exactly the skeptical arguments go wrong. Our topic here is the consequences for humility we get from a representational limitation to knowledge. The question for us will be whether we have reason to think that we are limited in this way, and what this means for intellectual humility. In particular, does it support humility throughout, or only for a particular domain of knowledge? And if it does support humility, does it support it to a great extent, or just to a small degree? We should first look at whether we are deeply ignorant of some facts, and second at what would follow from this for humility.

We are deeply ignorant of some fact just in case we cannot in principle represent it in thought or language. If we can't represent the fact, then we

won't be able to know that it obtains, no matter what evidence we have. This limitation is thus representational and not more narrowly epistemic. We can say that any fact that we cannot in principle represent in thought or language is an *ineffable fact*. All ineffable facts are unknowable, since we can't know facts that we can't represent. Ineffable facts are also incomprehensible; that is, we can't understand why they obtain, but not all incomprehensible facts are ineffable. That there is something at all might be incomprehensible, but it is not ineffable. Ineffable facts, if there are any, are a source of a limitation to our knowledge, and thus likely a source of intellectual humility. But to see what follows for humility we first have to see what reasons we have for there being ineffable facts.

2 Are There Ineffable Facts?

2.1 Clarifying the Issue

The question whether we are deeply ignorant of some facts is the same as the question whether there are ineffable facts, understanding the notion of an ineffable fact in a particular way. The way that is relevant for us here is one where an ineffable fact is one that is in principle beyond what we human beings can represent in thought or language. We should clarify this notion briefly in this section and then see whether we have any good reasons for there being ineffable facts.

We represent facts in language and thought. The fact that grass is green is represented with the sentence 'Grass is green,' and in the thought that grass is green. Such representations are conceptual representations—representations that can be true or false, not merely accurate or inaccurate like a photograph or a picture. It might be that not all declarative sentences aim to represent facts. Some might express feelings or norms, as those who subscribe to expressivist theories of normative discourse would have it. We will not be concerned with this possibility here. Instead, we will focus on the other way in which there might be a mismatch between our declarative sentences and the facts. Some facts might be such that no declarative sentence in our human languages and no thought in our human minds is suitable to represent it. What is the case would outrun what we can truly say if this possibility were to obtain. The question is whether the world is such that it contains facts that outrun our minds and languages. This question is not simply answered by the uncontroversial fact that sometimes language is not enough. When I say that I can't tell you how happy I am to see you, this does not mean that there is an ineffable fact tied to my happiness, although that might be true for other reasons. It is not the case that my happiness is so great that no words can say just how great. That is clearly not so, since I can tell you that I am extremely happy, or even that I am maximally happy. What I can't do with words is get you to feel my happiness by uttering words. But that doesn't give us an ineffable fact, only

a limitation of what words can do beside represent facts. I might not be able to find words to make you feel sufficiently happy, or to distract you from that toothache, but that is not a limitation in representing facts, only a limitation in certain effects of my speech. This limitation is causal, not representational.

Facts ineffable for us are facts that we human beings can't represent in thought or language. Ineffable facts so understood are ones that human beings can't represent, not ones that can't be represented in any language whatsoever, even those that might be used by aliens or gods. We are concerned here not with the limits of language and thought in general, but with our limits. We are concerned here with our limitations in our intellectual endeavors and their connection to intellectual humility as it might apply to us. Thus, we are concerned with what facts we can't represent and thus can't know. In particular, we should worry whether ineffable facts, if there were any, would not show that our minds are too simple to represent and comprehend some aspects of reality. If there are some facts that are so different from what we can represent that they are in principle beyond us, how can we hope to have an understanding of what reality overall is like? With this in mind, we should note that some facts are beyond what we in fact will be able to represent, although they are not beyond what we can in principle represent. The fact of what everybody's phone number is falls into this camp. There are too many people with phones for a single human being to be able to represent all the pairs of people and numbers, but this does not show that our minds are too limited in their comprehension of reality in general, only that they are limited in how many things they can represent at a time. Ineffable facts should be understood not simply as ones that are too complex in this sense, but that are in principle beyond us, even with more time and memory. Ineffable facts should be understood as being simply too alien for the human mind to represent conceptually. The question is whether there are ineffable facts so understood and what follows from the answer for intellectual humility.² If the answer is that there are such facts, then maybe intellectual humility is apt. If the answer is that there are no such facts, then we can be assured that we do not face a representational limitation to our knowledge and that deep ignorance is ruled out, and therefore humility might be misplaced.

2.2 Arguments in Favor of Ineffable Facts

Although we cannot give an example of an ineffable fact, we nonetheless can give arguments that there are such facts. There are several very powerful arguments to this effect, and I will briefly present two here.³

² For a more detailed characterization of ineffable facts, see [Hofweber 2016a](#).

³ Further arguments are discussed in [Fodor 1983](#), 119–129, [Nagel 1986](#), 90–99, [Chomsky 1975](#), [Collins 2002](#) for more on Chomsky's views, as well as [Hofweber 2006](#) and [Hofweber 2016a](#).

First, and possibly foremost, there is the argument from analogy. Although we can't give examples of facts ineffable for us, we can give examples of facts ineffable for other creatures. The fact that social media are central to present-day marketing is ineffable for the squirrel living outside of my office window, but not for human beings. We can represent more facts than squirrels can, and squirrels likely can represent more facts than other, even simpler creatures. But why should we not think that there could be creatures more complex than us that can represent even more facts? We can imagine aliens or gods that relate to us as we relate to the squirrels. They will again be unable to give examples of facts ineffable for themselves, but they will be able to give examples of facts ineffable for us human beings. Even if there in fact are no such aliens or gods, the argument from analogy makes clear that it is reasonable to think of ourselves as being somewhere on a ladder of being able to represent more and more facts, but not necessarily on the top of that ladder. Thinking about simpler creatures makes vivid that everyone has their range of facts that they can in principle represent, which is a part of all the facts that obtain. Every creature will be unable to give examples of facts ineffable for them, but nonetheless these facts are there. Everyone will face ineffable facts, except, of course, for the lucky creature who might be able to represent them all. But without some good reason that we are so lucky we should expect that we are just like the other ones. See [Nagel 1986](#), 95–96. We are higher up on the ladder, maybe the highest up for any creature that in fact exists, but we, too, won't be at the top.

Second, and not unrelated, is the argument that if what facts we can in principle represent and what facts do obtain coincide, then two very different things exactly overlap. But what facts obtain in general is independent of us, and so why should it be so that what facts obtain and what facts we can represent are exactly the same? Maybe there is some connection between what reality is like and what we can think, and maybe some form of idealism is true, but on the more standard ways of thinking about the relationship between our minds and reality there is no such connection. We would need some explanation as to why these two things coincide, but we have no prospect for one. The idealist route is not exactly popular, to say the least, and it is not clear how else this correlation could be explained.⁴ Without such an explanation, we should thus expect that these two do not coincide, and thus that there are ineffable facts.

Brief as the outline of these arguments was, it is overall reasonable to hold that there are ineffable facts, and thus that we are bound to remain deeply ignorant of some facts. Not only are we unable to know them, we are even unable to ask the question whether that particular fact obtains, since we are unable to represent it in thought or language. This will have

⁴ However, see [Hofweber 2016a](#) and chapter 10 of [Hofweber 2016b](#) for how such a correlation could be explained after all. A much more detailed discussion of the connection between idealism and the limits of conceptual representation is in [Hofweber Forthcoming](#).

implications for humility, but I hope to make clear in the following section that the implication does not arise directly from there being ineffable facts, but rather from how the effable facts relate to the ineffable ones. Ineffable facts alone guarantee that we won't be able to know everything, but by itself it is not so clear what else follows. We need to look a bit more carefully at how we should think of ineffable facts in relation to the effable ones.

2.3 The Hiddenness of the Ineffable and the Sub-algebra Hypothesis

Suppose then that the above outlined arguments are correct and we have good reason to think that some facts are ineffable for us in principle. There is a puzzle about these ineffable facts that should be given some serious thought. The puzzle is simply about where all these ineffable facts are. If there are ineffable facts, then they will be hidden from us in one clear way: we can't represent them in thought or language. But ineffable facts seem to be hidden from us in more ways than just the obvious way. The puzzle is why the ineffable facts are hidden from us in these extra ways. To illustrate, consider the apparent, but on reflection surprising, fact that we never seem to see something that we can't in principle represent in thought or language. We never seem to encounter something where it is clear to us that our concepts are simply not enough to represent what is going on. Just because we can't represent a fact in thought or language does not mean that we can't encounter it in other ways. One such way would be to encounter it in perception. Unless one has the view that all we can see we can also conceptualize, most famously that of [Kant \(1781\)](#), it isn't clear why that would be so. Why do we never see anything and recognize that we can't put it in thought or language? But even leaving perception aside, we might encounter ineffable facts in other ways. We might realize that what is going on in a particular area of inquiry (e.g., some part of science) is simply beyond what our minds are capable of representing. We might encounter our limits of conceptually representing the world when we try to find out what the world is like, and we might run into these limits all the time. But this doesn't seem to be the case. The question is why not. To make the last point more vivid, consider an extreme example: a creature that can only represent things that we represent in English with a word that starts with the letter b. That creature will frequently run into its own limits when it tries to find out about the world. It will see things where it realizes it doesn't have concepts for it. And it will find scientific questions for which it is clear that it can't represent the answers. Such a limitation in what one can represent will show up and become relevant, but our limitations don't seem to show up and appear to be irrelevant, even though we have reason to believe that we are limited. Our limitation appears to be more systematically excluded and separated from what we can represent. How the effable facts relate to the ineffable ones is a topic that is largely left

open, even if there are ineffable facts. And how this connection should be understood is crucial for what lesson we should draw for intellectual humility.

It seems that all facts are effable for us for all practical and even theoretical purposes. We never seem to run into our possible limitations when conducting inquiry and when engaging the world. But we have good reason to think that there are facts ineffable for us, and that we are just higher up on the ladder than the squirrel, but not all the way at the top. How can these two things go together? I think we can make sense of it with a mathematical analogy.

To simplify, consider the world just as a world of mathematical objects, and take the integers with addition, multiplication and subtraction:

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

Now, let's also imagine that the integers can describe their world. They have concepts for each of the integers, they have concepts for each of the three arithmetical operations: $+$, \times , $-$, and some basic logical concepts. The integers so equipped can ask various questions about the world: What is $2 + 2$? What is $8 - 10$? and so on. In their case, they can state the answers to all the questions they can ask. Whenever they ask about the sum, product or subtraction of some numbers they can talk about then they can also state the answer. The reason for that is simply that they can talk about all the integers, and the integers are closed under these arithmetical operations: the sum, product, or subtraction of two integers is always another integer. The integers with those cognitive capacities would thus naturally think that the integers is all there is. And for them, what else could there be? Nothing else is even conceivable to them.

This can all be so even if the world the integers live in is much richer than what they can represent. To illustrate again, suppose the world they live in really is the rational numbers, with the former operations as well as division:

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

Even though the world they live in is much richer than they think, the integers will think that they are all there is to reality. All the other rational numbers are completely hidden from them. They cannot talk about them, since they cannot reach them with the conceptual resources they have available. Even though there are infinitely many other numbers between any two integers, the integers with their conceptual resources are completely unaware of this. It is in principle beyond what they can even entertain.

To extend the mathematical analogy a bit further, we can note that the integers with addition, subtraction, and multiplication form an algebraic structure or an algebra. There is a domain—the numbers—and some operations on them—addition etc.—such that the domain is closed under those operations. A domain is closed under some operations just in case

whenever one applies the operation to members of the domain one gets another member of the domain as the result. The integers are closed under subtraction in this sense, but the natural numbers (i.e., the non-negative integers) are not. The result for $4 - 7$ is not another natural number, although it is an integer. The integers are closed under subtraction, but they are not closed under division. 1 divided by 2 is not another integer, and thus division takes the integers beyond themselves. But in our example, the integers do not have a concept of division. If they did they could entertain more than themselves, but they don't, and so it will seem to them that they are all there is.

The rational numbers also form an algebra, being closed under division as well (leaving out division by 0, as usual). They form a richer algebra; their domain is larger and they are closed under further operations. To put a common label on it, the integers form a *sub-algebra* of the rational numbers. Their domain is a subset of the domain of the rational numbers, the operations are a sub-set of the operations of the rational number algebra, and the sub-set domain—the integers—is closed under the relevant operations. It is because the integers form a sub-algebra of all of reality—the rational numbers—that it will seem to them that their sub-algebra is all of reality. It is a perfectly coherent and closed system that will seem to those who have just the conceptual resources to describe it to be all of reality. The integers will be just like that. They will think they can capture all there is to say, even though they are surrounded by infinitely many other numbers that are completely hidden from them. They think they can say all there is to say, even though reality is much richer than they can imagine.

This could in essence be our situation. We might be able to represent a sub-algebra of all of reality. We might be able to represent some facts and some relations or operations among facts such that whenever a fact we can represent has a relation we can represent to another fact, then we can represent that fact as well. We can represent the explanation relation, for example, and causal connections. And if the analogy holds, then we will always be able to represent the explanations of facts we can represent and the causes of facts we can represent. Whenever we might ask why it is the case that p or what caused it that p , we will be able to represent the answer. For any ordinary question we are able to ask, we will be able to at least state the answer.⁵ If what we can represent forms a sub-algebra of all the facts that obtain, then this would account for what we noticed above. First, it would support that there are ineffable facts. Any fact outside of our sub-algebra would be an ineffable fact, and since our algebra is a proper sub-algebra of all the facts this would vindicate that there are ineffable facts. Second, it would explain why the ineffable is systematically hidden from us. Ineffable facts would never be relevant when we ask for causes or

⁵ Some exceptions have to be made here for more non-ordinary questions, such as “What are all the ineffable facts?” However, it will hold for all questions that ask for the cause or the explanation of a fact that we can represent. See also section 4 of [Hofweber 2016a](#).

explanations of effable facts, since these relations, as well as others, would just get us back to our sub-algebra. Our sub-algebra would be causally and explanatorily closed, and so the ineffable facts would not be significant for finding out what caused or explains facts that we can represent.

The sub-algebra hypothesis makes sense of why the ineffable facts are so well hidden from us, even though we have good reason to think that they are there. Assuming a fairly standard conception of facts,⁶ I think it is the best way to understand the relationship of ineffable facts to effable ones, and the best explanation of why the ineffable is hidden beyond being ineffable. The question remains what follows from it for humility.

3 Ineffability and Humility

If there are ineffable facts at all, then we are bound to be and remain deeply ignorant of them. Thus we are bound never to know everything, but this isn't all that significant news, since we already know that we will never know everything. Cases of epistemic ignorance, such as the number of T. Rex that ever lived, already guarantee that we will never know everything. But deep ignorance has a special additional implication for humility that epistemic ignorance does not have. Deep ignorance supports humility, not in general, but in special cases, or so I hope to make clear.

Let us distinguish local from global relevance of deep ignorance for humility. Local relevance concerns local matters of fact, such as why my car won't start, what causes the extinction of the dinosaurs, and so on. Local relevance concerns questions about particular facts, but not the whole world. Global relevance concerns questions about the world as a whole and questions about all of reality. This includes whether naturalism is true, whether all of reality is the material world, whether everything is in space and time, and so on. Now, suppose what I said above is correct: there are ineffable facts and the sub-algebra hypothesis is correct. Then ineffable facts won't be locally relevant. For all local questions about why something happened or what caused it, the answers are facts within our sub-algebra. Such questions concern matters within our sub-algebra, since this sub-algebra is closed under causal and explanatory relationships, among others. Although the ineffable facts are there, they are not relevant for the answer to these questions. The answer to them is guaranteed to be effable even if there are lots of ineffable facts. Ineffable facts are thus not significant for scientific or other inquiry concerning local matters. And so for local question the issue of ineffability is irrelevant. No humility or anything else follows for local questions from there being ineffable facts, assuming the sub-algebra hypothesis is correct.

The situation is different for global questions. When we ask questions about all of reality, then the ineffable facts become important and then there

⁶ See section 5 of [Hofweber 2016a](#) for how such assumptions affect the present issue.

are consequences for humility. Consider the question: Is everything material (i.e., is the material world all of reality)? This is a yes-no question and thus we can represent the answer: everything is (or is not) material. But our own limitation in only being able to represent facts in our sub-algebra will likely mislead us into thinking that the answer that applies to our sub-algebra applies to all of reality. Here our situation might not be much different than that of the integers when facing the question whether everything is an integer. It will seem compelling to them that everything is an integer, since no other thing is even conceivable to the integers. This answer will seem obvious to them, even though it is completely false. Similarly in our case. It might seem compelling to us that all of reality is a certain way, even though that is completely false. It is not just that there might be some other parts of reality that are very different than the parts we are familiar with. Rather, we might be surrounded by further aspects of reality that are analogous to how the rational numbers surround our integers—aspects that are simply beyond our conceptual resources to even entertain. In that case, it will be compelling that all there is is what we can at least think about, but this might nonetheless be completely false.

The upshot of these considerations is that for global questions we will be able to represent the answers to our questions, but we might be misled into accepting the wrong answer for certain cases because of our limitations. This is the connection that supports humility. No humility follows from ineffable facts for local questions and ordinary scientific questions, since for those questions the ineffable facts fall out of the picture. All these matters are dealt with within our sub-algebra, but for global questions humility follows. For global questions, we need to realize that our own representational limitation only allows us to represent a sub-algebra of all the facts, with no access to the facts outside of it. It will thus seem to us compelling that our sub-algebra is all of reality, even if it is not and even if other parts of reality are very different. We should thus accept that we are possibly being misled into accepting the wrong answer to global questions. And there is no way of telling for which global questions the ineffable facts are or are not relevant. No similar worry arises for local questions.

The situation with ineffable facts is different than the worry that we should be humble about judging that everyone in the room is sitting down, since we can't rule out that there are invisible people standing somewhere. Without any positive reasons that there are invisible people in the room, I am in a good enough position to know that everyone is sitting down, assuming I see all the visible people sitting down. The worry here is not that there might be more facts than what we can represent and thus we should be humble making claims about all facts. To the contrary, we do have positive reason to think that there are ineffable facts, that they are hidden from us in a stronger sense than simply being unrepresentable, and that the sub-algebra hypothesis is true. This is not simply a "skeptical hypothesis." Instead we have reason to hold that it is indeed our situation,

although of course not conclusive reasons.⁷ Humility is supported by the considerations from ineffable facts, but not by those from invisible people.

4 Conclusion

We are likely bound to remain deeply ignorant of certain facts, since our minds are limited in what they can in principle represent.⁸ This limitation is an intellectual one, concerning our intellectual abilities. It supports intellectual humility, but only in a particular domain. If the sub-algebra hypothesis is correct, as we have reason to hold, then this limitation is irrelevant for local inquiry and thus for most of scientific inquiry. Ineffable facts and our deep ignorance fall out of the picture for such questions, but for global questions the ineffable does support humility, not because we can't represent the answers to these questions, but because we have reason to think that we are being misled into accepting the wrong answers. We should still pursue these questions, of course, but we should accept that our intellectual limitations might put these questions slightly out of reach for us. We can still speculate, but we might not be able to know.

The parts of inquiry that concern questions where deep ignorance supports humility are those that concern reality as a whole. Here some parts of the sciences and in particular metaphysics are the domains where humility is apt. We might be, and have reason to think that we are, like the integers surrounded by the rational numbers that we cannot even conceive, but which are just as real as the integers. In light of this, we should be humble about our abilities to understand all of reality, but not in our attempts to understand local matters.

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⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the reasons for and against this, see [Hofweber 2016a](#).

⁸ However, see [Hofweber 2016a](#) for a discussion of an implicit assumption on which the arguments in favor of ineffable facts depend, and an outline of an alternative.

Acknowledgements This project was made possible with the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation and Saint Louis University. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of either organization. The author benefited from many insightful talks and helpful discussions about intellectual humility at the 2015 Intellectual Humility capstone conference on Catalina Island and at Daniel Howard-Snyder's 2015 seminar in Pasadena on Intellectual Humility: Its Nature, Value, and Implications.

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