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“The Principle of identity of indiscernibles, the *tabula rasa* and unthinking minds.”

In the following passage Leibniz draws some philosophical consequences from the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles:

I have also pointed out that in virtue [en vertu] of insensible [insensible] variations no two individual things could be perfectly alike, and that they must always differ more than numerically. This puts an end to the blank tablets of the soul, a soul without thought, a substance without action... (*New Essays*, p. 57).¹

In this paper I shall first offer a partial reconstruction of Leibniz’s argument from the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles to the conclusion that the mind is not a *tabula rasa*. After arguing against the following reconstruction:

- (1) No two things could be perfectly alike. (PII)
- (2) If minds were blank tablets, they would be perfectly alike before receiving their first different sensory impressions.
- (3) Therefore, no mind is a blank tablet,

I shall propose, based on some things Leibniz says in other texts, the following one:

- (1) No two things could be intrinsically perfectly alike. (PII)
- (2) No two minds could differ merely dispositionally.
- (3) If minds were blank tablets, and they were not intrinsically perfectly alike before receiving their first different sensory impressions, they would then differ merely dispositionally.
- (4) If minds were blank tablets, they would be intrinsically perfectly alike before receiving their first different sensory impressions. (From (2) and (3))
- (5) It is not the case that only one mind is a blank tablet.

¹ *New Essays on the Human Understanding*, translated by P. Remnant and J. Bennett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Where I have “in virtue of” Remnant and Bennett have “in consequence of”, where I have “insensible”, they have “imperceptible”.

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(6) Therefore, no mind is a blank tablet. (From (1), (4), and (5)).

I shall then argue that premise (3) in that argument presupposes the erroneous thesis that the *tabula rasa* doctrine entails that minds do not always think. I shall then discuss the relationship between the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles and unconscious perceptions and also the role that unconscious perceptions play in the argument against the *tabula rasa* doctrine in the passage from the *New Essays* quoted above.

Then I shall discuss Leibniz's arguments from the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles to the theses that minds always think and substances always act. I shall argue that the most plausible reconstruction of these arguments are as follows:

- (1) No two things could be intrinsically perfectly alike. (PII)
- (2) No two minds could ever differ merely dispositionally.
- (3) If there were minds without thoughts at a certain time, and they were not then intrinsically perfectly alike, they would differ merely dispositionally at that time.
- (4) If there were minds without thoughts, they would be intrinsically perfectly alike at that time. (From (2) and (3))
- (5) It is not the case that there is only one mind without thoughts.
- (6) Therefore, minds always think. (From (1), (4), and (5))

and

- (1) No two things could be intrinsically perfectly alike. (PII)
- (2) No two substances could ever differ merely dispositionally.
- (3) If there were substances that at a certain time failed to act, and they were not then intrinsically perfectly alike, they would differ merely dispositionally at that time.
- (4) If there were substances that at a certain time did not act, they would be intrinsically perfectly alike at that time. (From (2) and (3))

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(5) It is not the case that there is only one substance that at any time of its existence does not act.

(6) Therefore, substances always act. (From (1), (4), and (5)).

I shall argue that these two arguments are self-undermining in the sense that they are cogent only if a premise (premise (2) in each argument) is supported by considerations that render the arguments superfluous.

Therefore I shall conclude that on the most plausible reconstruction Leibniz's arguments from the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles to the theses that the mind is not a *tabula rasa*, that minds always think, and that substances always act are not cogent. The first argument contains a false premise, and the other two are self-undermining in a very particular way.