

On the relation between the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles and the Principle of Sufficient Reason in the Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence

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One of the topics on which Leibniz and Clarke focus in their correspondence concerns the correct principles that should guide philosophy. This discussion is relevant to many other important topics in the correspondence. Indeed, Leibniz will try to dismantle Newtonian concept of space by arguing that this “chimera” violates two of the fundamental principles of philosophy: the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles.

The famous exchange between Leibniz and Clarke has become one of the main sources for establishing the nature of these two principles and the relation between them. There is a particularly popular account among scholars on this topic that broadly goes as follows: the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles is founded on the Principle of Sufficient Reason; the Principle of Sufficient Reason applies in the actual world, but is only a contingent truth; therefore, the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles and Leibniz’s argument against absolute space apply only on the actual world. Every step of this argument is supposed to be supported with textual evidence found in the Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence.

The aim of this paper is to challenge this account. As I will try to show, it is a mistake to read Leibniz’s remarks in the Correspondence as an account of the nature of the principles. They should be read instead as part of a more complex argument against absolute space.

I will argue that the principles are logically independent and that the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles is necessary. Finally, I will argue that Leibniz’s argument against absolute space in the Correspondence establishes that absolute space is metaphysically impossible.