

The Contingency of the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles

In his fifth letter to Clarke, Leibniz claims that “[the] supposition of two indiscernibles, such as two pieces of matter perfectly alike, seems indeed to be possible in abstract terms, but it is not consistent with the order of things, nor with the divine wisdom by which nothing is admitted without reason” (§21). Taken at face value, this passage suggests that Leibniz’s famous Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (PII) is contingent. More precisely, the passage suggests that the absence of indiscernibles in the actual world has the same modal status as the absence of other metaphysically possible but non-actual entities. There are no indiscernibles in this world for the same reason that there are no unicorns: while indiscernibles and unicorns are metaphysically possible, they are not included in the best of all possible worlds.

Even though the fifth letter to Clarke supports the contingency of Leibniz’s PII, several prominent scholars—including Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra in his recent monograph¹—argue that the PII cannot be contingent for Leibniz.² According to these authors, what Leibniz tells Clarke is misleading; other texts³ and other Leibnizian commitments show that we should not take Leibniz’s comments to Clarke at face value.

Against these scholars, my paper argues that the PII should indeed be interpreted as contingent, in Leibniz’s sense of ‘contingent.’⁴ More precisely, I argue that the mature Leibniz is committed to the metaphysical possibility of indiscernibles. In addition, I will show that Rodriguez-Pereyra’s case for the necessity of the PII (along with that of several other scholars) is based on un-Leibnizian assumptions about necessity and about the status of possibles. My arguments are based on careful readings of the Clarke correspondence and other mature texts in which Leibniz explicates his stance on metaphysical possibility.

It is crucial to note that Leibniz often ties metaphysical necessity to the Principle of Contradiction, while tying contingency to the Principle of Sufficient Reason. When we take this account seriously, we see how extremely demanding Leibnizian metaphysical

¹ Rodriguez-Pereyra, *Leibniz’s Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

² It is noteworthy that the authors of several reviews of Rodriguez-Pereyra’s book express reservations about his argument that the PII is necessary. See e.g. Michael Della Rocca’s review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, Stephen Steward’s review in *Leibniz Review* 25, 2015, and Massimo Mugnai’s review in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24:2, 2016.

³ These texts include other passages from the Clarke correspondence, especially section 6 of Leibniz’s fourth letter.

⁴ I am not the first to suggest that the PII is contingent. Yet, I am not aware of any other scholar who is arguing for the contingency of the PII in precisely the way that I am arguing for it.

necessity is. In fact, we see that even violations of the Principle of Sufficient Reason are metaphysically possible as long as they are not also violations of the Principle of Contradiction. Applied to the PII, this means that it is metaphysically possible for indiscernibles to coexist—or so I will argue. Admittedly, there would be no sufficient reason for the non-identity of these indiscernibles, and there would hence be a brute fact. Yet, that does not amount to a contradiction and hence does not undermine the metaphysical contingency of the PII.

Interestingly, the status of indiscernibles turns out to be different from the status of many other non-actual but metaphysically possible entities such as unicorns. The relevant difference is the following. According to a plausible interpretation of Leibnizian possible worlds, there are possible worlds that contain unicorns, but there are no possible worlds that contain indiscernibles. On the interpretation I have in mind, it is not the case that any combination of possibles constitutes a possible world.⁵ To qualify as a world, a collection of possibles must harmonize, or be connected in a particular way. Among other things, this means that were these possibles actualized, their perceptions would jointly give rise to a law-governed, intelligible phenomenal world.⁶ Perfections (or active states) in one thing must correspond to imperfections (or passive states) in another. Or, to approach the issue from a different angle, a possible world must satisfy God's wisdom; it must be unified by a wise, overarching plan or law. Collections of possibles that do not satisfy God's wisdom are not possible worlds.

Why are there no possible worlds that contain indiscernibles, even though indiscernibles are metaphysically possible?⁷ There are multiple ways to arrive at this conclusion. On the phenomenal level, a collection that contains indiscernibles would violate at least two rules that any possible world arguably needs to observe: a rule about the correspondence between active and passive states and a rule about the impenetrability of bodies. Suppose for instance that God were to create two indiscernible dogs. Because their perceptions would be qualitatively identical, those two dogs would perceive their surroundings from the same perspective. That would mean that there would be two dogs in the same place at the same time—a clear violation of impenetrability.⁸

⁵ See James Messina and Donald Rutherford (2009), "Leibniz on Compossibility," *Philosophy Compass* 4: 1–16; Gregory Brown, "Leibniz on the Possibility of a Spatial Vacuum and the Connectedness Condition on Possible Worlds" (forthcoming in *Compossibility and Possible Worlds*, eds. G. Brown and Y. Chiek); Thomas Feeney, "Leibniz, Acosmism, and Incompossibility" (forthcoming in *Compossibility and Possible Worlds*, eds. G. Brown and Y. Chiek).

⁶ Gregory Brown (Forthcoming) argues convincingly that this phenomenal world also needs to be a mechanistic world without a vacuum.

⁷ My interpretation of the status of indiscernibles is structurally similar to Gregory Brown's interpretation of the status of a spatial vacuum (Forthcoming): indiscernibles and spatial vacua are metaphysically possible even though they are not included in any possible world. This similarity is no coincidence; there are many important connections between Leibniz's arguments against the vacuum and against indiscernibles.

⁸ Supposing that God merely creates two indiscernible dog souls would not help. After all, to exhibit the kind of order and connectedness that is characteristic of worlds, each soul must arguably have a body that it unifies and animates. A soul that does not animate a body, or two souls animating one body, would be violations of the connectedness and order that is required for worlds.

Moreover, to be part of a spatio-temporal order, the dogs would need to interact (ideally, or phenomenally) with other things, which gives rise to further problems. Suppose, for instance, that the collection also contains a human being that perceives getting bitten by a dog with those spatio-temporal properties. The passive state of the human being would correspond to an action in two dogs, each of which is singly sufficient for phenomenally explaining the corresponding passion. That, I argue, violates Leibniz's principles about the correspondence between actions and passions. This latter problem has an analogue at the metaphysical level of description: a collection containing two indiscernible individuals would fail to be unified by a wise plan or law because one of the two indiscernibles is entirely expendable; it does not add anything of value because any role that it could play in the plan is already played flawlessly by the other.

In short, my paper argues that the PII is contingent, or that it is metaphysically possible for indiscernibles to coexist, even though no possible world contains indiscernibles. This interpretation is well supported by textual evidence. It is also helpful in explaining why some passages make the PII sound contingent, whereas others make it sound necessary: when Leibniz talks about possibilities, he is sometimes particularly interested in the possibilities that God considered when deciding which possible world to actualize. In that sense, indiscernibles are not a genuine possibility; they are, in fact, absurdities because they violate the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Yet, according to Leibniz's strict definition of metaphysical possibility, which does not depend on the notion of possible worlds, indiscernibles are possible.