



Leibniz's Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles

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To cite this article: Massimo Mugnai (2016) Leibniz's Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 24:2, 378-380, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2015.1116976](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1116976)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1116976>



Published online: 11 Jan 2016.



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Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra: *Leibniz's Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. viii + 215. £40.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-871266-4.

This is an exhaustive, clearly written and well-argued book devoted to the reconstruction of Leibniz's thoughts concerning the principle of identity of indiscernibles ('PII' henceforth). Rodriguez-Pereyra's aim, however, is not merely exegetical but philosophical as well. He thinks that, when we are confronted with a philosopher of the past, evaluation without exegesis is 'irresponsible', but that, at the same time, exegesis without philosophical analysis 'is not even possible' (9).

Rodriguez-Pereyra emphasizes that his book is not concerned with the whole of Leibniz's philosophy, but with only a part of Leibniz's metaphysics. The central claim of the book is

that for Leibniz the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Complete Concept Theory of Substance are more basic than the Identity of Indiscernibles, and that the identity of Indiscernibles is more basic than the thesis that there are no atoms. (9–10)

Even though the PII concerns only a part of Leibniz's metaphysics, it plays a fundamental role in Leibniz's philosophy: Leibniz employs it to show that there cannot be two intrinsically perfectly similar things; he uses it in his correspondence with Clarke against the notion of an absolute, homogeneous space; he appeals to it when arguing against the Cartesian conception of the material world as an extended homogeneous plenum; he uses it to argue against freedom of indifference and against Locke's conception of the mind as a *tabula rasa* (3).

Rodriguez-Pereyra points out that Leibniz's definition of PII is stated in terms of 'perfect similarity' rather than in terms of shared properties (or accidents), as in the prevailing approach of the contemporary analytical tradition (11). According to Rodriguez-Pereyra, for Leibniz PII means that 'there cannot be intrinsically qualitatively perfectly similar things', where 'thing', or 'things', refers to 'all kinds of entities' (185) (excepted those belonging to the realm of what is not instantiated in nature and is only mental and imaginary (22)). Thus, Leibniz's version of PII is 'even stronger than the strongest contemporary version of the principle, for according to contemporary philosophers a difference in size or magnitude counts as an intrinsic difference, but not according to Leibniz.' (4). For Leibniz, indeed, quantitative differences are extrinsic differences, with the result that 'Leibniz's principle rules out things that differ in size or magnitude alone' (200).

Leibniz attempts to derive PII from the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Moreover, the assumption of the doctrine of the complete concept on

Leibniz's part is equivalent to the assumption of PII, each complete concept playing the role of the principle of individuation in Leibniz's metaphysics.

Rodriguez-Pereyra develops his inquiry commenting on 36 passages extracted from Leibniz's works displayed in chronological order, from the *Meditation on the Principle of the Individual* (1676) to the fifth letter to Clarke (1716). The passages, all translated into English, constitute a collection of the most relevant texts where Leibniz presents or discusses the PII. Through a careful analysis of these texts Rodriguez-Pereyra documents how Leibniz elaborates his final version of the principle. When he wrote *The Confession of a Philosopher* (1672–1673), Leibniz did not accept the PII; but just three years later, in *A Meditation on the Principle of Individuation* he asserts the PII (42) and since then he continued to consider it as a basic principle of his philosophy.

Concerning the modal status of PII, Rodriguez-Pereyra distinguishes *weak* from *strong* necessity. PII is weakly necessary if the proposition 'that no possible world contains perfectly similar things in it is necessary'; it is strongly necessary if the proposition 'that no *possibilia* are perfectly similar is necessary'. Strong necessity implies weak necessity, but not vice versa, because even though no possible world contains perfectly similar things in it, there may be perfectly similar things belonging to different worlds. As Rodriguez-Pereyra recognizes, Leibniz is 'never absolutely clear' about the kind of necessity he is attributing to PII, but some arguments he employs when arguing in favour of PII commit him to the strong necessity. Rodriguez-Pereyra is quite dismissive of Leibniz's distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity and (rightly) remarks that 'Leibniz never doubted that the Identity of Indiscernibles was hypothetically necessary since for Leibniz even what is contingent in itself is necessary given the will of God to create the best of possible worlds.' (28). Therefore, he concludes that the Leibnizian distinction between absolute and hypothetical necessity is not really interesting in relation to Leibniz's PII. This claim, however, is subject to criticism: one may appeal to the distinction to explain why in some texts Leibniz seems to claim that PII is necessary, whereas in others he clearly assumes that it is contingent. According to Leibniz, who reproduces here a scholastic distinction, we have hypothetical necessity when we may understand that a given thing can be different from how it actually is and, this notwithstanding, it becomes necessary as soon as other things, external to it, are presupposed. If we consider God's absolute power, PII is contingent, being possible that God creates two perfectly similar individuals; but it becomes necessary under the hypothesis of God's wisdom.

As Rodriguez-Pereyra argues, there is no room for perfectly similar accidents in Leibniz's philosophy, thus PII applies not only to individual substances, but to individual accidents as well (196). Moreover, Leibniz does not reify individual accidents and does not ground the similarity of substances on the similarity of their accidents. The similarity of substances

derives not from the similarities of their accidents but from how the substances intrinsically are: that is, substances A and B resemble each other because they are F, not the other way around. But this does not mean Leibniz is reifying accidents or properties (199).

Rodriguez-Pereyra concludes his careful examination of Leibniz's texts arguing that Leibniz's arguments for PII 'do not succeed'. Therefore, from this conclusion he draws the drastic consequence that 'Leibniz is not entitled to use the Identity of Indiscernibles productively to derive other theses' (204). Fortunately, Leibniz himself admits that he does not rely uniquely on PII to argue for these other theses, and this seems to imply that Leibniz was well aware of the fact that he 'did not need' the PII to derive these theses.

The book is very rewarding for any reader interested in Leibniz's metaphysics: very subtle and careful when attempting to evaluate Leibniz's philosophical theses concerning PII, it is quite reliable even from the exegetical point of view.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2015.1116976>

Donald C. Ainslie and Annemarie Butler (eds.): *The Cambridge Companion to Hume's Treatise*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 430. £19.99 (pb.). ISBN 9780521529143.

The *Cambridge Companion to Hume's Treatise* is one among other useful and conveniently organized volumes on Hume. It contains 14 chapters: one is biographical, another concerns the overall structure of the *Treatise*, five are devoted to issues in Book 1 ('Of the Understanding'), and five to issues in Books 2 ('Of the Passions') and 3 ('Of Morals'). While nearly every chapter in this volume is skilfully written and rigorously argued, the strongest half of the volume, in my opinion, concerns Books 2 and 3 of the *Treatise*. It is, overall, a volume worth having for those interested in Hume studies and it is, without question, an absolute must for researchers specializing in Hume. There are at least four chapters which are dazzling in their fecundity and execution. Kenneth P. Winkler's chapter, 'Hume on Scepticism and the Senses', advances the radical claim that 'there is, in *Treatise* 1.4.2, no sign that Hume (or any believer portrayed by Hume) believes in bodies specifically different from perceptions' (136). Paul Russell's chapter, "'Hume's Lengthy Digression": Free Will in the *Treatise*', offers a masterful discussion of Hume's doctrine of free will, which defends the view that Hume has contemporary relevance and ought to be categorized as a forerunner of critics of the "morality system" such as Strawson and Williams.