Is Leibniz’s Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles Necessary or Contingent?

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The Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (henceforth: PII)—the principle that no two numerically distinct things are perfectly alike—features prominently in Leibniz’s metaphysics. Leibniz uses it when he discusses atoms, the vacuum, the nature of space and time, and the nature of individual substances, to name just a few of its applications. Despite its centrality to his philosophical system, however, it is surprisingly difficult to determine what modal status Leibniz ascribes to the PII. On the one hand, there are many occasions throughout his philosophical career where he says or implies that scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles are impossible. This suggests that he endorses a necessary version of the PII. On the other hand, there are several key passages—in particular in (but not limited to) his correspondence with Samuel Clarke—where Leibniz seems to say or imply that scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles are possible (albeit not actual). This suggests that he endorses a merely contingent version of the PII. Thus, Leibniz’s attitude towards the modal status of the PII appears to be inconsistent. How should we deal with this apparent inconsistency? Can it be resolved? And if so, what is Leibniz’s considered view? In short, what is the modal status of Leibniz’s PII?

Given the unclear and seemingly contradictory textual situation, it is unsurprising that there is no consensus among commentators on what Leibniz’s view is. Some argue that he endorses the necessary version of the PII throughout his philosophical career, including the late correspondence with Clarke.1 Others are so impressed by the mixed textual evidence that they read Leibniz as having no consistent view on the issue.2 Recently, however, a third view has gained in popularity.

1. This interpretation goes all the way back at least to Russell 1992 [1937], 65 (Russell also explicitly acknowledges though that there is a prima facie tension in Leibniz’s texts that requires to be settled). Other proponents who consider Leibniz’s PII a necessary principle include Rescher 1967, 48; Broad 1975, 40–41; Frankel 1981; Jolley 2005, 86; Futch 2008, 147; and Rodriguez-Pereyra 2014, chapter 9.

2. See, for example, Chernoff 1981, 137, who writes: “Any attempt to interpret PII, as it appears in the correspondence with Clarke, as a unique principle that accords with all of Leibniz’s relevant remarks is doomed to failure.” Similarly, Cover and O’Leary-Hawthorne argue that different arguments lead Leibniz
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1. Leibniz’s PII

In this section, I will briefly explain what Leibniz takes the PII to say, bracketing the question of what modal status he ascribes to the principle. A standard contemporary formulation of the PII goes as follows:

\[(\text{PII}) \forall F (Fx \leftrightarrow Fy) \rightarrow x = y \]  

In other words, if x and y share all their properties, then x and y are identical. Leibniz is not a fan of this way of putting the PII. He typically avoids quantification over properties and prefers instead to state the principle in terms of resemblance, difference, or indiscernibility. Here are three representative passages from three different periods of Leibniz’s career:

\[\text{[N]ever will be found two eggs, or two drops of milk, or two leaves, or two animals, and in general two things so similar that after an accurate examination, no difference can be noticed. (Letter to Casati in 1689, A 2.2.289)\]}

\[\text{[A]ll substances are of different natures, and […] there are no two things in nature that differ in number alone. (Letter to De Volder on 21 January 1704, G II 264/LDV 291)\]}

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4. This formulation is taken from Forrest 2016. The converse of the PII is the Indiscernibility of Identicals: if x is identical to y, then, for every property F, object x has F if and only if object y has F. Leibniz endorses both.


6. For a thorough discussion of this letter, see Rodriguez-Pereyra 2014, chapter 6.

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2. Leibniz's PII, as understood in this paper, is a principle that is not subject to the criticism raised by Pereyra in the case of his book. Pereyra’s recent book, which takes a similar view and concludes “that the modal status of the PII is far from settled” (Steward 2015, 118).


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By stating the PII without mentioning (the sharing of) properties or accidents, Leibniz remains faithful to his nominalist framework, according to which “everything, apart from individual substances, is a mere name.” While he generally does not seem much bothered by talk of accidents, there are many passages where he makes clear that all there really is are individual substances and their modifications or affections. Presumably, Leibniz thinks that speaking of accidents is acceptable, as long as one does not reify them and take them to be entities over and above individual substances. Given that accidents do not constitute an ontological category distinct from substances for Leibniz, it makes sense for him to avoid formulations of the PII which presuppose that there is something (properties or accidents) which substances have in common or share. Stating what one wants to state (in this case, the PII) in terms of similarity or difference instead is of course a typical nominalist strategy.

What is the scope of Leibniz’s PII? It is clearly pretty wide. In just the three passages quoted above, Leibniz includes in it “eggs,” “leaves,” “animals,” “drops of milk,” “substances,” “real beings,” and “things.” In other texts, he also states that the PII ranges over (besides many other entities) “individuals,” “beings,” and “monads.” All of this suggests that Leibniz’s PII has the widest possible scope and applies to anything, and any kind of thing, whatsoever. While this is something we should keep in mind, I will for the most part deal with Leibniz’s PII as it applies to the fundamental entities of his mature metaphysics, namely, (simple) individual substances, or monads. Whatever the mature Leibniz takes the ontological status of eggs, leaves, and other bodies to be, it is clear that all of their features are ultimately grounded in, or constituted by, the fundamental entities of his ontology. Hence, whatever qualitative difference there may be between your breakfast egg and my breakfast egg is ultimately due to whatever differences there are in the two distinct sets of monads that constitute or ground each of the two eggs. Furthermore, it is quite plausible that the reverse is also true and that each difference in the grounding entities leads to a difference in the grounded entities. Therefore, if the PII as restricted to monads turns out to be necessary (or contingent), then presumably the unrestricted version of the PII, ranging over all things — including eggs, leaves, etc. — is necessary (or contingent) as well.

One should expect that the PII, if it is necessary, applies not just to actual substances but also to merely possible ones, i.e., mere possibilia. This is true, if understood correctly. Leibniz’s official position is that possibilia are ideas or concepts in the divine intellect. While the PII presumably applies to such ideas as well — it would be quite odd if God had two numerically distinct but indiscernible ideas of Peter in his mind — this is not the case that raises questions about the modal status of the principle. However, Leibniz also uses terms like ‘possible substance’ and ‘possible world’ to refer to what God could have created but in fact did not bring into existence. A possible substance in this sense is of course not an idea in God’s intellect, for these ideas...
are, like God himself, uncreated (and uncreatable) and exist eternally. Instead, it is whatever would correspond to such an idea or concept, had God decided to realize the idea or to instantiate the concept. Questions about the modal status of Leibniz’s PII arise in connection with possibilia in the latter sense. Thus, the question that is usually discussed is not whether there are, eternally, two indiscernible ideas or concepts in the divine intellect, but rather whether, on Leibniz’s view, God could have created two numerically distinct indiscernibles corresponding to the same complete individual concept.

Before continuing, there is one more clarification to be made. Saying that Leibniz’s PII is a necessary truth seems straightforward enough, but it can actually mean two different things. It can mean that there is no possible world containing two indiscernible things a and b (call this ‘weak necessity’), or it can mean that there are no two indiscernible possibilia a and b, whether a and b are in the same world or not (call this ‘strong necessity’). Officially, I will attribute only the weaker thesis to Leibniz, although I suspect that he also subscribes to the stronger one.

2. Arguments for the Contingency of Leibniz’s PII

It has recently been argued that Leibniz subscribes to a merely contingent version of the PII. On this reading, Leibniz’s position is that it is at least in principle in God’s power to create two or more numerically distinct indiscernibles. Commentators who defend this interpretation usually make claims only about Leibniz’s mature period (starting in the mid-1690s), with a special focus on the correspondence with Clarke.18 In what follows, I will discuss four arguments for interpreting Leibniz this way. On my view, none of them decisively establishes the contingency of Leibniz’s PII. The first two can be refuted rather easily; rebutting the third and fourth argument will require a bit more work.

First, one might be inclined to think that Leibniz takes the PII to be only contingently true because on many occasions he leaves the principle un-modalized.19 He often states it matter-of-factly without using any modal vocabulary, as when he writes that “there is no perfect similarity anywhere.”20 It should be clear, however, that such statements are entirely compatible with a modally strong version of the PII. It is quite common for people to say that p while being fully committed to “necessarily, p,” so the fact that Leibniz often does not modalize the PII is no reason for thinking that he does not consider it necessary.

There are some formulations which might be taken to suggest that Leibniz wants to emphasize that the truth of the PII is a special feature of the actual world and that it is not true in other possible worlds. For example, he writes in a letter to De Volder that “it cannot happen in nature that two bodies are at the same time perfectly equal and similar.”21 One might argue that the “in nature” operator in this and similar statements has the effect of restricting the scope of the PII to the actual world, thereby contrasting the actual world with other possible worlds. I agree that this might be what is going on, but without further evidence it is not at all clear that adding “in nature” to a given principle always has such a restricting effect (especially not if the principle is modalized, as is the case in the letter to De Volder). It may well be that by adding “in nature,” Leibniz wants to indicate instead that the deep metaphysical (and modally robust) structure of reality is somehow such that each thing must differ qualitatively from every other thing, which would suggest a modally strong version of the PII.

17. Here, I am following Rodríguez-Pereya 2014, 28–29, both in content and terminology. Cover and O’Leary-Hawthorne 1999, 192, make the same distinction (or at least a very similar one) in slightly different terms. For the purposes of this paper, I will ignore complications that might result from Leibniz’s special conception of possible worlds, which differs in some important respects from our contemporary understanding; on this, see Bender 2016b.

18. The most recent example where such a restriction is made explicit is Jorati 2017. See also Jauernig 2008, 191 and Lin 2016, 447–448.

19. I am not aware of anyone endorsing this argument.

20. DM §9/AG 41–42.

In any case, it is clear that neither the fact that Leibniz often leaves
the PII unmodulated nor the fact that he sometimes adds the phrase
“in nature” (or similar qualifiers) is particularly strong evidence that
Leibniz’s PII is contingent.

Secondly, Leibniz sometimes offers what might sound like empirical “arguments” to substantiate the PII. In his fourth letter to Clarke, he writes:

There is no such thing as two individuals indiscernible from each other. An ingenious gentleman of my acquaintance, discoursing with me in the presence of Her Electoral Highness, the Princess Sophia, in the garden of Herrenhausen, thought he could find two leaves perfectly alike. The princess defied him to do it, and he ran all over the garden a long time to look for some; but it was to no purpose. Two drops of water or milk, viewed with a microscope, will appear distinguishable from each other. This is an argument against atoms, which are confuted, as well as a vacuum, by the principles of true metaphysics.

(LC 4.4)

Passages like this could be read as very basic a posteriori justifications of the PII: For each pair of things checked so far, we have always found an internal difference between the two things; therefore, by induction, there are no two numerically distinct things that are perfectly similar. Of course, such empirical considerations at most establish that the PII is true in the actual world. It would be misguided, however, to take this as evidence that Leibniz believes only in the contingent version of the PII. It is not at all inconsistent or irrational to provide empirical evidence for the PII and yet to be committed to the PII being true necessarily, especially in cases where an interlocutor not only questions the necessity of the PII but where she doubts that the PII is true at all (and this is certainly the case with the Princess Sophia in the garden). Thus, even if it is Leibniz’s intention in LC 4.4 to provide an a posteriori argument for the PII (an assumption which may also be disputed), this gives us no reason for thinking that he there assumes the contingency of the PII.22

Thirdly, there are various passages (especially in the correspondence with Clarke) where Leibniz appears to allow for the possibility of two things being perfectly alike. The following two key texts are both from his fifth letter to Clarke:

This supposition of two indiscernibles, such as two pieces of matter perfectly alike, seems indeed to be possible in abstract terms. (LC 5.21)

When I deny that there are two drops of water perfectly alike, or any two other bodies indiscernible from each other, I do not say it is absolutely impossible to suppose them (je ne dis point qu’il soit impossible absolument d’en poser). (LC 5.25)

On the face of it, these two passages certainly create the impression that Leibniz considers violations of the PII possible.23 Even they are not entirely conclusive, however, as was recently pointed out by Rodriguez-Pereyra and Lin.24 That seems to be possible is compatible with being impossible. Similarly, the possibility of supposing something — that is, its being conceivable (in some sense at least) — is consistent with the thing itself being impossible.

Notwithstanding these considerations, it is hard to deny that LC 5.21 and LC 5.25, at least when read in isolation, seem to suggest that Leibniz intends to communicate the contingency of the PII to Clarke (this point is stressed by Lin). As I will argue in more detail in Section 3, however, at least in the case of LC 5.21, paying attention to the

22. See Broad 1975, 42–43 for a similar suggestion. Frankel 1981, 193 comments on LC 4.4 as follows: “[T]he passage is, I suggest, better read as simply giving an empirical example of a logically or metaphysically necessary truth [...].”

23. See, for example, Cover and O’Leary-Hawthorne 1999, 204 and Chernoff 1981, 134–137.

precise wording changes the picture significantly. The fact that Leibniz characterizes scenarios in which the PII is violated as “abstractions” strongly suggests that he considers such scenarios impossible. The basic idea is that abstractions are in principle such that they cannot refer to anything real. If this is correct, then Leibniz’s enduring commitment to the necessity of the PII is revealed even in a passage which on its surface appears to constitute evidence for the contingency of the PII.

The case of LC 5.25 is less clear, but I think Rodriguez-Pereyra is right when he points out that “Leibniz’s supposition of two indiscernibles might be a counterpossible scenario.” Thus, Leibniz is contemplating in this passage either a counterfactual scenario (in which case violations of the PII would be possible) or a counterpossible scenario (in which case violations of the PII would be impossible). I do not think that either of these two competing readings can be ruled out on the basis of LC 5.25 alone. How to interpret the passage largely depends on how to understand the verb ‘poser.’ As we will see later, Leibniz is sometimes quite liberal when it comes to our ability to suppose or imagine things. There are many occasions where he grants that we can suppose impossible scenarios, at least in some sense of “supposing.”

These considerations show that LC 5.25 on its own does not refute interpretations according to which the PII is necessary. For the time being, therefore, let us conclude that the evidence from LC 5.21 and LC 5.25 is at best inconclusive.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, Leibniz sometimes appeals to God’s wisdom to justify the PII. This is often taken to show that he rejects the necessary version of the PII and settles for the contingent version (at least in his correspondence with Clarke). I have just discussed the first half of an important sentence from LC 5.25. Here is the sentence in full:

“When I deny that there are two drops of water perfectly alike, or any two other bodies indiscernible from each other, I do not say it is absolutely impossible to suppose them, but that it is a thing contrary to the divine wisdom, and which consequently does not exist. (LC 5.25; my emphasis)"

Why would the existence of two indiscernibles be incompatible with divine wisdom? Leibniz explains why earlier in the correspondence. Here are two passages from letters 4 and 5, respectively:

It is an indifferent thing to place three bodies, equal and perfectly alike, in any order whatsoever, and consequently they will never be placed in any order by him who does nothing without wisdom. But then, he being the author of things, no such things will be produced by him at all, and consequently there are no such things in nature. (LC 4.3)

I infer from that principle [i.e., the Principle of Sufficient Reason], among other consequences, that there are not in nature two real absolute beings, indiscernible from each other, because if there were, God and nature would act without reason in treating the one otherwise than the other, and that therefore God does not produce two pieces of matter perfectly equal or alike. (LC 5.21)

Leibniz here argues for the PII on the basis of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (henceforth: PSR). The PSR says that there is a sufficient reason for everything, or equivalently, that there are no brute facts.

The argument for the PII goes roughly as follows: If there were two numerically distinct indiscernibles \( a \) and \( b \) in the actual world, then God would have had no reason to prefer this scenario (the actual one) over one where \( a \) and \( b \) are switched. For given that \( a \) and \( b \) are perfectly alike, the two scenarios can hardly differ with respect to perfection. Why should one be better than the other, given that, by stipulation, they are perfectly alike? Hence, God “would act without reason


26. For a thorough discussion of the PSR in contemporary metaphysics, see Dasgupta 2016.
in treating the one otherwise than the other,” so God’s choice would be “without wisdom.”

No matter how this PSR-based argument for the PII is reconstructed in detail, it clearly appeals to divine wisdom. This is often thought to prove the contingency of Leibniz’s PII. The idea is the following: For a choice to be wise, it is required that there be some not-so-wise alternative course of action that the agent (in our case, God) decides not to pursue. Otherwise, it would be easy — in fact, trivially easy — to act wisely. Thus, if bringing it about that \( p \) counts as a wise action, it would be rather odd for \( p \) to be a necessary truth. This line of thought suggests that Leibniz’s PII cannot be necessary, for if it were, even a very mediocre god would be able to pick a world where it holds. After all, if the PII is necessary, every world is such a world! Therefore, the fact that Leibniz appeals to God’s wisdom in his argument(s) for the PII seems to show that he considers the PII contingent; otherwise, so the thought goes, his appeal to wisdom would be rather pointless. In short, grounding the PII in divine wisdom seems to render the principle contingent.

But do the passages cited above (LC 4.3 and LC 5.21) really show that Leibniz wants to ground the PII in God’s wisdom? It is far from clear that this is his intention. Some commentators have suggested that Leibniz argues for a modally weak version of the PII in his exchange with Clarke only because he regards any attempt to convince his correspondent of the modally stronger version as hopeless. On such a reading, Leibniz partly adopts Clarke’s point of view (as he often does with his interlocutors) and argues that even if there were possible worlds which violate the PII, at least the actual world does not. In order to argue this way, Leibniz himself need not believe that there is a possible world where the PII is violated. If this consideration is correct, the fact that Leibniz’s arguments for the PII in passages like LC 4.3 and LC 5.21 are based on God’s wisdom does not prove that Leibniz wants to ground the PII in divine wisdom. That is, we do not have to read these passages as claiming that the PII is true because of God’s wisdom.

To be sure, I am not arguing here in detail for the correctness of this interpretation. All I want to suggest is that, while in some sections of the Clarke correspondence Leibniz indeed derives the PII from divine wisdom, we should not overestimate the significance of such statements. To establish the contingency of Leibniz’s PII, it is not enough to simply refer to LC 4.3 and LC 5.21, because, just as in the case above, it is quite difficult to determine whether Leibniz is concerned in these sections with counterfactual scenarios or counterpossible ones. That Leibniz intends to make the PII dependent solely on God’s wisdom is a fairly strong exegetical claim (one which presupposes the counterfactual reading) and it is unclear whether it can be supported adequately. Thus, whether or not Leibniz intends to ground the PII in divine wisdom remains an open question at this point.

27. LC 5.21.
28. LC 4.3.
30. The role of divine wisdom in arguments of this sort is emphasized by Lin 2016 and Jorati 2017.
31. The reverse may not be true for Leibniz because he has a theory of possible worlds that is importantly different from twentieth- and twenty-first-century theories of possible worlds. See Jorati 2017 and Bender 2016b on this point.
32. Lin argues that Leibniz’s PII is grounded in divine wisdom in Lin 2016, 449 and Lin (unpublished manuscript). See also Jorati 2017, whose reading differs significantly from Lin’s. She argues that “the coexistence of indiscernibles is metaphysically possible even though there is no possible world in which there are indiscernibles” (Jorati 2017, 926). Although both Lin and Jorati read Leibniz’s PII as contingent, they nonetheless assign different modal statuses to the principle. On Jorati’s reading, violations of the PII are relatively far-fetched scenarios which are metaphysically possible but do not qualify as Leibnizian worlds; hence, the PII is more modally robust on her reading than on Lin’s.
33. See Jolley 2005, 86 for a concise version of this suggestion.
34. See Jolley 2005, 86 and Rodriguez-Pereyra 2014, 124–126 for different versions of such a reading.
35. For two recent, very well worked-out attempts, see Lin 2016 and Jorati 2017.
3. The Necessity of Leibniz’s PII

In the last section, we saw that none of the arguments for Leibniz’s PII being contingent is entirely convincing. In this section, I will argue for the stronger claim that from the 1680s onward, Leibniz maintained that the PII is necessary and held onto this view even in his letters to Clarke. On my reading, then, there is no significant shift in Leibniz’s attitude towards the modal status of the PII. Especially in the case of the correspondence with Clarke, it will take some interpretative effort to work out Leibniz’s commitment to the necessity of the PII.\(^{36}\)

Before turning to his exchange with Clarke, let us see what Leibniz’s position was in some of his earlier texts. Here are two passages from 1686 and 1696, respectively:

[I]t is not possible that there are two individuals entirely similar or differing only in number. (Remarks on Arnauld’s Letter, G 2.54/L 335–336; translation modified, my emphasis)

[I]t is not possible for two things to differ from one another in respect of place and time alone, but […] it is always necessary that there shall be some other internal difference. So there cannot be two atoms which are at the same time similar in shape and equal in magnitude to each other; for example, two equal cubes. Such notions are mathematical, that is, they are abstract and not real. For all things which are different must be distinguished in some way and in the case of real things (in realibus) position alone is not a sufficient means of distinction. (On the Principle of Indiscernibles, C 8/MP 133; my emphases)

Leibniz here does not shy away from modalizing the PII. It may seem obvious that in both texts he considers scenarios with two indiscernibles impossible. Even for passages like these, however, one might suggest an alternative reading; perhaps all Leibniz wants to say is that the actual world is such that it cannot contain two things that are perfectly alike (presumably because this would, again, be incompatible with God’s wisdom). Modal language is notoriously context-sensitive after all and can be used quite flexibly. If we interpret the two passages this way, the PII would (to use Leibniz’s language) be only hypothetically necessary, but not absolutely necessary. That is, violations of the PII would not be impossible per se, but only on the hypothesis that God is a wise and benevolent creator.\(^{37}\)

It should be clear, however, that this is a rather unnatural reading of these two passages. Leibniz in no way qualifies the modal expressions used in these two passages (“necessary,” “not possible,” “cannot,” and “must”). This usually indicates that he has the per se (or absolute) meaning of these terms in mind.\(^{38}\) Moreover, Leibniz emphasizes in the second passage that the PII ranges over all “real things” (in realibus). That is, the PII — when stated more precisely — says that no two real things which are numerically distinct can be perfectly alike. This may sound like a restriction, but it is clear that by “real” Leibniz does not mean “actual.” Rather, real things are contrasted with “mathematical” or “abstract” notions. There is nothing in any possible world that could correspond even in principle to such abstract notions. In Leibniz’s nominalist framework all candidates for existence are individual and concrete entities. The notions corresponding to such individuals are complete, not abstract. Hence, the fact that the contrast class of the things to which the PII is meant to apply is that of “abstract notions” strongly suggests that in On the Principle of Indiscernibles, Leibniz quantifies over all the things that God could have created (all “real things,”

\(^{36}\) It should be noted that I am not arguing, or even suggesting, that Leibniz is justified in believing that the PII is necessary. My goal is more modest: I claim only that Leibniz consistently commits himself to the PII being necessary.

\(^{37}\) An interpretation along such lines has been suggested by Jorati 2017 and by Lin (unpublished manuscript). On per se modalities in Leibniz, see Adams 1994, 10–22 and Lin 2012.

\(^{38}\) In De libertate et necessitate, Leibniz advises using modal terms this way (see A 6.4.1447/AG 21). It should be noted, however, that he himself sometimes diverges from this practice.
whether actual or not) — which is tantamount to the necessary version of the PII.

In the *New Essays*, finished in 1704, Leibniz appears not to back away from the necessity of the PII:

The ‘principle of individuation’ reduces, in the case of individuals, to the principle of distinction of which I have just been speaking [i.e., the PII]. If two individuals were perfectly similar and equal and, in short, indistinguishable in themselves, there would be no principle of individuation. I would even venture to say that in such a case there would be no individual distinctness, no separate individuals. (RB 230/A 6.6.230)

Crucially, Leibniz is not concerned with *actual* scenarios here, but with *counterfactual* ones. He essentially says that if *a* and *b* were perfectly alike, then *a* and *b* would not be numerically distinct either, which is nothing but an expression of a modally robust version of the PII. The second point that is noteworthy about this passage is that Leibniz equates the PII with what he calls the *principle of individuation* (he restricts this identification to individuals, but this is all we are concerned with in any case).

The principle of individuation that Leibniz is speaking of is a topic that was hotly debated among scholastic philosophers. It is supposed to tell us in virtue of what a given individual is an *individual*, or what is responsible for the individuality of individuals.39 To give a well-known example, on a widespread medieval reading of Aristotle, *matter* is the principle of individuation.40 The basic idea is that two different things of the same kind — for instance, Tina and Tim who are both human beings and thus share the form of humanity — are not distinguishable from each other in terms of their form alone. There must be something else that explains their individuality, and this something, the account has it, is matter. Tina is *this* individual and Tim *that* one because the form of humanity inheres in different portions of matter.41

By identifying the principle of individuation with the PII, Leibniz suggests that one can (at least in principle) get at the individual by describing all of its features. If the PII holds, it is guaranteed that a complete description — that is, a Leibnizian complete concept — is satisfied by only one individual. Once it is admitted that the possibility of two individuals being completely alike can be ruled out, we can be sure that there are *complete individual concepts*, as Leibniz has it.42 Individual concepts are such that only one thing can fall under them — otherwise they would not be concepts of *individuals*. Be that as it may, it would seem that whatever the principle of individuation is, it holds necessarily. A principle of individuation states that in virtue of which individuals are what they are; this appears to be a point about what it is to be an individual (whether the individual is actual or merely possible), and hence a matter of necessity.43 Therefore, by identifying the principle of individuation with the PII in the passage from the *New Essays*, Leibniz suggests that the PII is necessary as well.

Keeping in mind Leibniz’s way of relating the principle of individuation and the PII in the *New Essays*, let us now return to his correspondence with Clarke. In LC 5.26 Leibniz writes:

I admit that if two things perfectly indiscernible from each other did exist, they would be two, but that supposition is false and contrary to the great principle of reason. The vulgar philosophers were mistaken when they believed that there are things different solo numero, or only because

39. The principle of individuation is, in Martin Pickavé’s words, “the principle accounting for the individuality of individuals” (Pickavé 2007, 17). For a very helpful overview over medieval accounts of individuation, see King 2000.

40. Whether this is actually Aristotle’s view is controversial. The relevant passage in Aristotle is *Metaphysics* VII.8.

41. For an explanation and discussion of Aquinas’s version of this account, see King 2000, 11–12.

42. For a very different interpretation of how the PII and the principle of individuation are related, see Jorati 2017.

43. Could it be only a matter of hypothetical necessity, but not of metaphysical necessity? I will discuss this objection shortly.
they are two, and from this error have arisen their perplexities about what they called the principle of individuation. (LC 5.26; my emphasis)

It is noteworthy that Leibniz raises the principle of individuation again here. To be sure, he does not explicitly identify the PII with the principle of individuation, as he did in the New Essays. It becomes clear, however, that he still sees the two principles as closely related. The “vulgar philosophers,” he argues, had a hard time coming up with an adequate principle of individuation because they allowed for things differing solo numero. The implication of this is that the only way to overcome the difficulties with the principle of individuation is to accept the PII. In other words, on Leibniz’s view, the PII is needed in order to resolve the “perplexities” about the principle of individuation.

This account seems not to differ substantially from the view expressed in the New Essays. Hence, LC 5.26 might be read as hinting that Leibniz still holds that the PII simply is the principle of individuation (even though he falls short of explicitly saying so). At the very least, he certainly still sees the two principles as closely related. This suggests that Leibniz’s stance on the modal status of the PII has not changed either, and is thus more stable than often thought. Given that he still sees a very close tie between the PII and the principle of individuation in his fifth letter to Clarke, it seems quite likely that he still takes the PII to be true necessarily, for otherwise it is hard to see how the PII could play that role. Hence, Leibniz seems to slip Clarke the necessary version of the PII in LC 5.26 without making that fully explicit. This is thus one of the occasions where I think Leibniz does not manage to fully hide the fact that he favors the necessary version of the PII over its contingent counterpart.

At this point, one might raise the following objection: Even if I am right in claiming that Leibniz identifies the principle of individuation with the PII in the New Essays and that he hints at such an identification in the Clarke correspondence, it could still be only hypothetically necessary that the PII is the principle of individuation.44 Perhaps, one might argue, there are possible worlds where individuation is accounted for in entirely different terms, without resting on the PII at all. If this is so, then the fact that the PII serves as the principle of individuation in the actual world may be thought to be dependent on God’s wisdom (i.e., on the hypothesis that God is wise). In that case, the passages suggesting an identification (or a modally robust link) between the two principles would not prove that the PII is metaphysically necessary, but at most that it is hypothetically necessary, which (in Leibniz’s modal universe) is equivalent to the PII being only contingently true.

In response to this objection, I would like to point out that Leibniz seems to argue that even conceiving of numerical distinctness makes sense only against the backdrop of the PII. In the passage from the New Essays, Leibniz says that if in scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles, “there would be no principle of individuation,” adding that “in such a case there would be no individual distinctness.”45 This suggests that, strictly speaking, such scenarios are internally incoherent and thus inconceivable on Leibniz’s view. His remarks in the New Essays thus indicate that he intends to make not just a point about what the principle of individuation happens to be in the actual world, but a conceptual point about individuation. If there is indeed such a strong conceptual link between the principle of individuation and the PII, however, it is hard to see how it could be just hypothetically necessary that the PII is the principle of individuation. Instead, Leibniz seems to think that it is utterly inconceivable to account for individuation in different terms,46 which in turn means that it must be

44. This objection was raised by an anonymous referee.
45. RB 230/A 6.6.230.
46. This is suggested by Leibniz’s counterfactual (and contradictory-sounding) statement in RB 230/A 6.6.230: “If two individuals were perfectly similar and equal and, in short, indistinguishable in themselves, there would be no principle of individuation. I would even venture to say that in such a case there would be no individual distinctness, no separate individuals.” The antecedent invites us to consider a scenario with numerically distinct indiscernibles. In the second part of the consequent, however, we are told that in this very
metaphysically (and not just hypothetically) necessary that the PII is the principle of individuation.

As we have seen, Leibniz is less outspoken about the relation between the two principles in his correspondence with Clarke than he is in the *New Essays*. That he still holds a view similar to the one just sketched even in the letters to Clarke, however, is hinted at by his remark that “to suppose two things indiscernible is to suppose the same thing under two names.” This passage (with its air of contradiction) is reminiscent of the text from the *New Essays* just discussed. What Leibniz appears to convey is that in (seemingly) supposing two numerically distinct indiscernibles, one is really conceiving only of one and the same thing under two different guises. Why is that? One possible explanation is that the lack of numerical distinctness is due to a lack of a principle of individuation. The fact that Leibniz appears to establish a close link between the principle of individuation and the PII in LC 5.26 suggests this much. If this reading is correct, then it is plausible that Leibniz’s view of how the PII and the principle of individuation are connected did not undergo significant change in the period between the *New Essays* and the correspondence with Clarke. Leibniz seems to suggest in his fourth and fifth letter to Clarke that without the PII, numerical distinctness would be inconceivable. All of this suggests that it is metaphysically (and not just hypothetically) necessary that the PII is the principle of individuation for Leibniz.

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47. LC 4.6.

48. Again, Leibniz seems to use a counterpossible statement to express conceptual and metaphysical impossibility.

49. At any rate, Clarke seems to have understood Leibniz along such lines. With respect to LC 5.26, he writes: “It is allowed (sec. 26) that two things exactly alike would really be two, and yet it is still adduced that they would need the principle of individuation, and in the Fourth Letter, sec. 6, it was expressly

Is Leibniz’s PII Necessary or Contingent?

There are two more places in the correspondence with Clarke where Leibniz suggests or implies the necessity of the PII. In LC 5.21— a passage already discussed in Section 2 as *prima facie* evidence that Leibniz’s PII is contingent— he says:

This 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. The vulgar fancy such things because they content themselves with incomplete notions. (LC 5.21; my emphases)

At first glance, one might take Leibniz to be saying here that violations of the PII are possible, and this is indeed how the passage is often read. I think, however, that the fact that he writes that “the supposition of two indiscernibles [...] seems [...] to be possible in abstract terms” actually suggests the opposite. As we have seen earlier, Leibniz typically contrasts what is abstract with what is real. Against this backdrop, we may surmise that what Leibniz effectively says in LC 5.21 is that once we abstract away from certain differences, it may seem that the existence of indiscernibles is possible. The implication of this is that when it comes to real things (individuals, substances, or monads), violations of the PII are impossible. The end of LC 5.21, where Leibniz says that scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles are conceivable only by employing “incomplete notions,” can be read in a similar way. Incomplete notions do not correspond to incomplete things— on

affirmed that they would be only the same thing under two names. A (sec. 26) supposition is allowed to be possible, and yet I must not be allowed to make the supposition” (LC 68). It is interesting to see that Clarke connects LC 4.6 and LC 5.26 in the same way I have just suggested.

50. See, for example, Jorati 2017, 911–912.

51. This option is considered, but ultimately dismissed by Jorati 2017, 911–912.

52. Unlike complete notions, incomplete notions do not allow us to pick out individual substances unambiguously. There is no one-to-one correspondence between individual substances and incomplete notions; that is, one and the
Leibniz’s view, all created things, and all creatable things, are complete and individual. Hence, if the “vulgar” belief in numerically distinct indiscernibles arises only from the use of incomplete notions, then the implication seems to be that when it comes to complete things—that is, individual substances with complete concepts—violations of the PII are not possible, since for Leibniz, if a thing has a complete concept, then it is an individual. If this reading of LC 5.21 is correct, then Leibniz reveals his commitment to the necessity of the PII even there, despite appearances to the contrary.

The interpretation of LC 5.21 just presented, however, is not the only one available. The phrase “in abstract terms” can be understood in at least two different ways, depending on what we are supposed to abstract away from. Leibniz might mean that when we suppose that two things are indiscernible we abstract away from certain differences which in reality distinguish the two things (the reading I just suggested). Alternatively, he might mean that what we abstract away from is God’s wisdom, in which case the PII would be only hypothetically necessary, but per se possible (and hence contingent).

Which of the two readings is the correct one? The fact that Leibniz mentions divine wisdom in the very same sentence in which he talks about abstraction might be taken to suggest that the second reading is the more plausible one. However, I believe that we should opt for the first reading. The crucial point is that Leibniz’s talk of incomplete notions at the end of LC 5.21 indicates that it is the notions themselves which are abstract or incomplete. Abstracting away merely from divine wisdom, however, would not render the notions as such incomplete. For even things inconsistent with God’s wisdom have complete notions. An individual substance which God decides not to create (because it is not part of the best of all possible worlds) is nonetheless represented by a complete notion. In other words, if we start with complete notions and then “abstract away” from the fact that God is wise, the notions thereby generated do not become incomplete. In contrast, if we ignore certain features which in reality distinguish two things, the result of this ignoring (i.e., the “abstracting away”) would be incomplete notions. And as I pointed out above, if Leibniz indeed uses the phrase “in abstract terms” in this way, this suggests that he takes the PII to be necessary in LC 5.21.

Let me now turn to the third passage from the Clarke correspondence which, on my view, indicates that Leibniz there subscribes to the necessary version of the PII. In LC 4.6, he speaks of scenarios with indiscernibles as “impossible fictions.” The texts reads as follows:

To suppose two things indiscernible is to suppose the same thing under two names. And therefore to suppose that the universe could have had at first another position of time and place than that which it actually had, and yet that all the parts of the universe should have had the same situation among themselves as that which they actually had, such a supposition, I say, is an impossible fiction. (LC 4.6; my emphasis)

One might think that Leibniz here endorses the necessary version of the PII, simply because he characterizes scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles as “impossible.” As in other cases, however, the context-sensitivity of modal terms creates some wiggle room for
proponents of competing interpretations. Perhaps, one might argue, all Leibniz wants to say is that the supposition of two actual indiscernible things (or of the actual universe having a position in space and time different from the one it actually has) is impossible, simply because no such thing happens in the best of all possible worlds. I do not think that this is a very convincing reading of the passage as a whole though. The crucial point, on my view, is that Leibniz uses the label “impossible fiction” to characterize scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles. This indicates, I will now argue, that he considers such scenarios to be metaphysically impossible. Since how LC 4.6 is to be interpreted very much depends on what exactly Leibniz means by “fiction” there, I turn now to a discussion of this term.

Leibniz appears to use the term “fiction” in different ways in different contexts. He sometimes seems to employ it to describe scenarios which he thinks are non-actual but metaphysically possible. At the very end of his fifth letter to Clarke, for example, Leibniz labels things like atoms “fictions,” things whose existence he thinks would violate the PSR. About two decades earlier, Leibniz wrote to Bayle: “When I said that the soul would still feel all that it feels now even if there were only it and God in the world, I was only employing a fiction.” Since Leibniz holds that God could, at least in principle, create just one lonely soul without creating anything else, this also is a case of a fiction which is metaphysically possible. In other places, however, Leibniz describes as fictions scenarios which he takes to be metaphysically impossible. In LC 4.2 for example — just a few sentences before LC 4.6 — he explains that “a simple will without any motive is a fiction, not only contrary to God’s perfection, but also chimerical and contradictory, inconsistent with the definition of the will.” Saying that a mere will (i.e., a will lacking any inclinations or preferences) is a fiction that is contradictory clearly amounts to saying that such a will is (logically or metaphysically) impossible. This is made even clearer by Leibniz’s remark that a mere will is “inconsistent with the definition of will.” Hence, a fiction in the sense of LC 4.2 is a scenario which may appear to be possible, but in fact is impossible because it involves a (more or less hidden) contradiction or some sort of conceptual confusion. Later in the same letter, in LC 4.13–17, Leibniz uses the term “fiction” in a similar manner (some of these sections will be discussed shortly).

Given this ambiguity, it is natural to wonder what sort of fiction is at stake in LC 4.6. Is Leibniz talking about a non-actual, but nonetheless metaphysically possible scenario? Or is the “impossible fiction” he is talking about there contradictory and hence metaphysically impossible? The fact that elsewhere in the fourth letter (in LC 4.2 and LC 4.16), Leibniz explicitly talks about fictions which are contradictory suggests that this is also what he means in LC 4.6. This consideration alone, however, is insufficient to prove that the fiction in LC 4.6 is contradictory, for as we have just seen (and as has been pointed out

58. A reading along these lines is developed in detail by Lin (unpublished manuscript).
59. This is pointed out and discussed in some detail in Jorati 2017, 922–924.
60. See LC 5.127 (a passage also discussed by Jorati 2017). Whether all, some, or none of the cases mentioned in LC 5.127 are indeed metaphysically possible for Leibniz is of course up for debate. There may be quite a bit of disagreement on individual cases.
61. G 4.517/WF 202; my emphasis.
62. See my discussion in Bender 2016a, 164–170.
63. For more such passages, see Jorati 2017, 924, n. 60.
64. LC 4.2; my emphases.
65. In LC 4.16, Leibniz equates an impossible fiction with a contradictory hypothesis. He goes on in LC 4.17 to compare the method used in the earlier sections to indirect proofs in mathematics: “And the case is the same as in geometry, where by the very supposition that a figure is greater than it really is, we sometimes prove that it is not greater. This indeed is a contradiction, but it lies in the hypothesis, which appears to be false for that very reason.”
66. Rodriguez-Pereyra 2014, 120–121 argues that the fiction in LC 4.6 must be a contradictory one because Leibniz says later in the same letter (in LC 4.16) that a fiction is a “contradictory hypothesis.”
by Jorati), Leibniz does not use the term in a consistent way, not even within his correspondence with Clarke.\(^67\)

I believe, however, that if we pay close attention to Leibniz’s discussion of the “movement of the universe” scenario later in the fourth letter, it will become clear that he had a modally robust claim in mind all along. For our purposes, the most important section is LC 4.13:

To say that God can cause the whole universe to move forward in a straight line or in any other line, without making otherwise any alteration in it, is another chimerical supposition. For two states indiscernible from each other are the same state, and consequently, it is a change without any change. Besides, there is neither rhyme nor reason in it. But God does nothing without reason, and it is impossible that there should be any here. Besides, it would be *agendo nihil agere*, as I have just now said, because of the indiscernibility. (LC 4.13)

In this passage, Leibniz pursues several distinct lines of thought at once. What is crucial for us, however, is his idea that in moving the whole universe, God would be doing nothing at all. Leibniz makes this point twice, emphasizing that God would bring about a “change without any change” and that this would involve an action without any acting. These paradoxical sounding remarks wear their contradictoryness on their sleeves. Why would God be doing nothing at all in the scenario of the movement of the universe? Leibniz’s answer seems to be that our initial way of describing the scenario — as a change from one state to another state — turns out to be contradictory and conceptually confused. The seemingly distinct (but indiscernible) states, which God would bring about in moving the entire universe, are in fact one and the same state. Given that Leibniz characterizes the “movement of the universe” scenario in this way in LC 4.13, we can conclude that the fiction introduced in LC 4.6 must be contradictory — after all, the scenario discussed in LC 4.6 is the same as the one discussed in LC 4.13. It is a fiction in the sense that we appear to conceive of something which is, strictly speaking, inconceivable because it involves a contradiction. Thus, in LC 4.6, Leibniz is talking about a scenario which is metaphysically impossible, not about something metaphysically possible that is non-actual.\(^68\)

LC 4.13 also makes explicit the connection between the “movement of the universe” scenario and the PII. Leibniz says there that it is (metaphysically) impossible for the universe to be moved because this would generate indiscernibles states. He can argue this way, however, only because he presupposes the metaphysical impossibility of numerically distinct indiscernibles; otherwise his argument would not warrant such a modally robust conclusion. In other words, Leibniz can conclude that the “movement of the universe” scenario is metaphysically impossible only because he assumes that the PII is metaphysically necessary.\(^69\)

Let me close this section with a remark about Leibniz’s strategy in LC 4.2 and in LC 4.13. What is somewhat surprising about his strategy in LC 4.2 is that he *first* says that a mere will is incompatible with the perfection of God (i.e., with God’s wisdom), and *then* goes on to say that a mere will is a contradictory notion. How can something contradictory at the same time be contrary to divine wisdom? It would seem that if an option is not reconcilable with divine wisdom, it must at least be conceivable by God, and hence possible, for otherwise it would not be an option at all and even non-wise creators would have no trouble avoiding it. Something similar is going on in LC 4.13, where we are told, in one and the same section, that God would have no  

\(^67\) We cannot simply presuppose that Leibniz uses the term in the same way throughout the fourth letter. Overall, it is unclear whether he takes it to be a technical term with a fixed meaning.

\(^68\) For a different reading of LC 4.6, see Jorati 2017, 922–924. She argues that a “fiction,” as used in LC 4.6, is a scenario that is metaphysically possible.

\(^69\) It also should be noted that in LC 4.13, Leibniz makes clear that his *agendo nihil agere* point is completely independent from any considerations having to do with divine wisdom. After all, saying that in bringing about a scenario with numerically distinct indiscernibles, God would have to act and not to act is very different from saying that God would act unwisely.
reason to move the universe and that such a scenario is contradictory anyways. I think we can make sense of Leibniz’s strategy in LC 4.2 and LC 4.13 by assuming that he is implicitly taking into account our epistemic limitations. Of course, he would admit that fictions like a mere will or two perfectly similar indiscernibles initially seem possible and that we can imagine such things (at least in some relevant sense of imagining) — even though these fictions ultimately turn out to be contradictory and impossible. On Leibniz’s view, however, even for someone (like Clarke) who is not able to figure out that these fictions are contradictory, it is still possible to appreciate that the imagined scenarios are not actual by recognizing that they are incompatible with divine wisdom. All of this suggests that Leibniz treats the cases of a mere will and of numerically distinct indiscernibles analogously and that on his view they are both metaphysically impossible.

4. Objections and Replies

In this section, I will discuss three objections that might be raised against my interpretation. They are all based on discussions in the recent literature. I believe that each one of them can be countered and I will state my responses in turn.

Objection 1: Multiple Instantiation

On the reading developed here, Leibniz denies that it is in God’s power to create more than one individual per complete concept. But why would Leibniz deny that God has this power? God is omnipotent, an objector might argue, and when he is able to create one individual substance that matches the complete concept of Peter, he surely can create a second one as well. What could possibly prevent God from having the power to bring into existence more than one instantiation of a given complete concept?70 The worry, then, is that my interpretation imposes restrictions on divine power that are too strict and perhaps also ad hoc.

70. For an especially clear version of this argument, see Jorati 2017, 915.

One easy way out would be to simply say that, while omnipotent, God cannot do the impossible. Such an answer is of course not going to satisfy the objector because it simply insists on the necessity of the PII. The concern is, after all, that it seems implausible that God cannot multiply instantiate the same individual concept. Fortunately, we can do better. Recall that God is not only omnipotent but also omniscient. He knows every fact there is to know not only about the actual world, but about all possible worlds. How does God know all that? Leibniz’s answer to this question is clear: for him, all divine knowledge is conceptual knowledge. God represents both the actual world and every non-actual possible world in virtue of an infinity of complete individual concepts. One implication of this picture is that God has no way of representing scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles. For if the complete concept of Peter were instantiated twice, the concept would not change at all. But since all divine knowledge is conceptual knowledge, it turns out that God would be entirely ignorant of there being two Peters instead of one, which is impossible.

The objector might go on and suggest that perhaps God knows about the two Peters by reflecting on his own volitions.71 To this I respond that it is impossible for Leibniz’s God to even will to create two indiscernibles; that is, God cannot even form the volitions required for such a creative act. Here is why: As Leibniz repeats over and over again, the divine intellect is the realm of possibilities.72 That is, all possible creation scenarios are represented by the divine concepts or ideas. But according to Leibniz, God can will only what he can think about because the intellect is prior to the will.73 Since he cannot even think about scenarios with two indiscernibles, he also cannot will them.

Scenarios with indiscernibles of course seem conceivable to us, and Leibniz would not deny this. As we saw in Section 3, he calls these and other such scenarios “impossible fictions” or “abstractions,” and he

71. Jorati 2017, 915–916 discusses a similar point (see especially n. 39).
72. See, for example, G 7.305.
73. See, for example, G 1.256.
argues that they seem conceivable only because we employ “incomplete notions.” All of this suggests that Leibniz considers numerically distinct indiscernibles to be metaphysically impossible, just as I have argued above. Hence, when objecting to my interpretation of Leibniz’s PII as necessary, appealing to the apparent intelligibility of scenarios which violate the PII is of no help. I happily concede that Leibniz himself acknowledges such apparent intelligibility, but he also holds that our intuitions about such issues can be, and often are, misguided. In many cases, our apparent conceptions turn out to be mere pseudo-conceptions, which in reality are not fully intelligible.

Objection 2: Locating the Contradiction
The second objection bears some relation to the first. For Leibniz, a truth is necessary just in case its denial entails a contradiction. Given this account of necessity, it is hard to see how the PII could be a necessary truth. Does its denial entail a contradiction? It does not seem so. At the very least, the scenario of numerically distinct indiscernibles does not wear its contradictoriness on its sleeve. Hence the warranted question: Where is the contradiction? If no contradiction can be identified, the objector argues, we should acquiesce in Leibniz’s PII being contingent.

What are we to make of this? Does this consideration by itself show that Leibniz is committed to the PII being contingent? I don’t think it does. At least two things can be said: First, the contradiction that results from denying the PII may be so hidden that it is too hard for us to spot it, limited epistemic agents that we are. That we do not immediately “see” the contradictoriness of a scenario presented to us need not be because it is not contradictory; it may simply be because our intellectual capacities are too limited. If you have a logicist conception of necessity, like the one often ascribed to Leibniz, and collapse

metaphysical necessity into logical necessity, you are bound to have cases of this sort. You might also be forced to say, for example, that the proposition that one and the same object is blue all over and green all over entails a hidden contradiction, although it is far from obvious where the contradiction lies in such cases.

At this point, however, one might worry that in the case at hand there are not many places where the contradiction could hide. After all, the only non-logical notions which are involved in the case of the PII are “thing” and “perfect resemblance.” Is it really plausible that a complete analysis of these two notions would reveal to us that scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles are contradictory? Despite this concern, attempting to locate the contradictoriness of scenarios with indiscernibles within Leibniz’s framework does not seem completely hopeless to me. One option might be that the notion of “thing” is such that it excludes the possibility of several perfectly alike things. This may seem implausible at first, but as we saw in Section 3, Leibniz establishes a close tie between the PII and the principle of individuation. If he does hold that a denial of the PII makes it, strictly speaking, impossible to even conceive of individuality and of individual things, then his view might in fact be that the notion of “thing” and the truth of the PII are more closely intertwined than they might at first appear.

Another possibility is that the contradictoriness of PII violations has something to do with the fact that God is omniscient (a fact which holds necessarily). As we have just seen (in our discussion of Objection 1), violations of the PII might be incompatible with God’s omniscience. So perhaps this is where the contradiction is to be located. To be sure, violations of the PII would not be impossible per se in such a case, because they would be impossible only on the hypothesis that God is omniscient. Is this then only hypothetical necessity? In a sense the answer is yes, but it should be noted that on the present which he elsewhere describes as “contradictory,” supports this interpretation; see LC 4.2, LC 4.6, and LC 4.13, as well as my discussion above.

77. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.
78. I am grateful to an anonymous referee who pointed this out to me.
suggestion, the PII would not be hypothetically necessary in the usual Leibnizian sense. Violations of the PII would be incompatible not merely with God’s wisdom or goodness, but also with God’s omniscience. That is, the relevant hypothesis is different from what it normally is, which may affect the modal strength of the claim. Incompatibility with divine omniscience presumably yields something modal more robust than incompatibility with divine goodness.  

Second, one could take a very different approach and stress that it is far from obvious that the logicist picture just sketched, which goes back to Bertrand Russell and Louis Couturat, is really Leibniz’s picture. 80 Perhaps Leibniz accepts genuine metaphysical necessity as a category distinct from logical necessity, in which case the PII may be metaphysically necessary but not logically necessary. 81 I will not pursue this issue any further here, but I think it is far from obvious what position Leibniz takes on the relation between logical and metaphysical modalities.

Objection 3: PSR and PII

As we have seen, Leibniz often argues for the PII on the basis of the PSR. One might think that this fact speaks against the necessity of Leibniz’s PII. Michael Della Rocca, for example, has recently suggested that Leibniz may be committed to the contingency of the PII because he is committed to the contingency of the PSR:

Given the central role of the PSR in supporting the PII, the modal status of the PII turns to a great extent on the modal status of the PSR. [...] Leibniz clearly sees the PSR as a ground of contingency and as undergirding divine activity. It may be that to safeguard the freedom of this activity, Leibniz cannot afford to see the PSR as necessary. In that case, the PII would not be necessary either. (Della Rocca 2015, n.p.)

I will not discuss here the thorny issue of the modal status of Leibniz’s PSR. 82 I am willing to accept that Leibniz indeed sees it as contingent. However, inferring from this that the PII too is contingent strikes me as premature, even if it is granted that “the modal status of the PII turns to a great extent on the modal status of the PSR.” The reason for my skepticism is this: Even if Della Rocca is right and Leibniz’s unrestricted PSR turns out to be contingent (because a necessary PSR would be a threat to divine freedom), it may well be that Leibniz considers more restricted versions of the PSR necessary. If the PII is based upon such a restricted version of the PSR, it will turn out to be necessary as well.

What might be the nature of this restriction? To answer this question, it is helpful to consider Leibniz’s different uses of the PSR in different argumentative contexts. On many occasions, he argues for a proposition $p$ by pointing out that, if not-$p$ were true, God would have made a choice without a sufficient reason. On other occasions, he argues for a proposition $p$ by pointing out that, if not-$p$ were true, a state of affairs would obtain which lacks a ground. In the former type of argument, God and God’s choice play an essential role; in the latter type, neither God nor any other agent making a choice has any role to play. 83 In both argumentative strategies, it is assumed that there must

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79. Leibnizian modalities come in many different flavors (perhaps more than he has expressions for), so it could be that the modal status of the PII cannot be neatly captured by the usual categories (i.e., absolute and hypothetical modalities). It should be noted, however, that the suggestion that violations of the PII are incompatible with divine omniscience seems to have the rather peculiar result that violations of the PII are inconceivable to God. There would then be something that does not involve an internal contradiction, and yet cannot be conceived by God. Admittedly, this would be a weird category and one which sounds rather un-Leibnizian at that.

80. For clear expressions of the logicist reading, see Couturat 1901, viii–ix and Russell 1992 [1937], xii.

81. This is suggested by Frankel 1981, 209. For interesting discussions of this point, see also Cover and O’Leary Hawthorne 1999, 211–213 and Jauernig, 2008, 224–225. Jorati 2017, 902 explicitly states that logical and metaphysical modalities coincide for Leibniz.

82. I do so in Bender 2016a, 232–242.

83. I am not the first to point this out. See Cover and O’Leary Hawthorne 1999,
be a reason for everything (i.e., the PSR holds), but the kinds of reason are different. The first strategy appeals to *agential reasons* (reasons an agent has when confronted with different options), the second to *non-agential reasons* (which may be understood as metaphysical grounds). Given this, one might suspect that Leibniz sees the non-agential version of the PSR — that is, a version of the PSR which allows only for a restricted class of reasons, namely non-agential ones — as necessary. Thus, even if the unrestricted PSR (where the type of reason remains unspecified) is true only contingently, this leaves open the possibility that Leibniz considers the non-agential version of the PSR to be metaphysically necessary. Arguments based on this version of the PSR would yield a PII that is necessary.\(^{84}\)

Of course, to have a more complete picture of how the PSR and the PII are related for Leibniz, one would have to work out in much greater detail what exactly are the different versions of the PSR Leibniz is working with and how they feature in his arguments for the PII. For my purposes, however, it is enough to see that, pace Della Rocca, Leibniz can, at least in principle, coherently assign different modal statuses to the PSR and the PII, assuming that he is sometimes working with an unrestricted version of the PSR and sometimes with a restricted version.

### 5. Conclusion

On my view, Leibniz is firmly committed to the view that the PII is necessary. I have argued against the alternative reading, according to which he sees the PII as contingent, and a detailed analysis of several texts, most importantly his letters to Clarke, has revealed that such a reading is ultimately unconvincing. Leibniz’s consistent identification of the PII with the principle of individuation, his characterization of scenarios with indiscernibles as “fictions,” and his description of such scenarios as “abstract” and “incomplete” all provide strong evidence that Leibniz sees the PII as necessary. Overall, we can conclude that he considers scenarios with numerically distinct indiscernibles to be metaphysically impossible throughout his philosophical career.\(^{85}\)

### Bibliography

**Abbreviations for Primary Texts**

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<tr>
<th>Code</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong></td>
<td>Leibniz, G. W. <em>Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe</em>. Edited by Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Darmstadt, Leipzig, and Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923). Cited by series, volume, and page.</td>
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\(^{84}\) Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Rice University and Humboldt University, at both of which I received very helpful feedback from the audiences. This paper has also benefited greatly from conversations with Michael Della Rocca, Julia Jorati, and Martin Lin. Finally, I am grateful to two anonymous referees, who provided invaluable comments on an earlier version of the paper.
Is Leibniz’s PII Necessary or Contingent?


