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West or Best? Sufficient Reason in the Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*

By

STEPHEN GROVER (NEW YORK)

Zusammenfassung

In der Korrespondenz mit Clarke ist Leibniz' Standardargument gegen die Annahme, daß Raum und Zeit absolut seien, daß Gott sich bei der Wahl des zu erschaffenden Universums gezwungen sähe, gegen das Prinzip des zureichenden Grundes zu verstoßen, wenn diese Annahme richtig wäre: Bloße Unterschiede in räumlicher und zeitlicher Hinsicht ergeben keinen Vorteilsunterschied, und da Gott nur aus Vorteilsgründen handelt, sind solche Unterschiede nicht möglich. Leibniz stellt dieses Argument als ausschließlich abhängig vom Prinzip des zureichenden Grundes dar, eine gängige Interpretation ist aber, daß dies Prinzip determinierte Objekte göttlicher Wahl nur dann ergibt, wenn ein ergänzendes Prinzip von Kontingenz hinzutritt. Diese Auslegung muß falsch sein, wenn Leibniz hier authentisch bleibt, und insofern wäre doch das Prinzip des zureichenden Grundes eher als irgendein Prinzip des Besten Leibniz' Prinzip der Kontingenz.

Leibniz often employs the following pattern of theological argument, here quoted from the correspondence with Samuel Clarke:

“When two incompatible things are equally good, and neither in themselves, nor by their combination with other things, has the one any advantage over the other, God will produce neither of them”¹.

In the context of the Clarke correspondence, the main polemical employment of this pattern of argument is in criticism of the Newtonian conceptions of absolute space and time. Here is a good example with respect to space:

“Space is something absolutely uniform, and without the things placed in it, one point of space absolutely does not differ in anything from another point of space. Now, from hence it follows (supposing space to be something in itself, besides the order of bodies among themselves) that it is impossible there should be a reason why God, preserving the same situations of bodies among themselves, should have placed them in space after one certain particular manner and not otherwise – why everything was not placed the quite contrary way, for instance, by changing east into west”².

Leibniz describes this ‘demonstration’ that space cannot be absolute as relying upon the axiom that “nothing happens without a sufficient reason why it

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1 *Leibniz' viertes Schreiben* (s. 19); GP VII, 374; quoted from *G. W. Leibniz. Philosophical Essays*, transl. by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Indianapolis 1989 (Ariew/Garber), p. 329.

2 *Leibniz' drittes Schreiben* (s. 5); GP VII, 364; Ariew/Garber, 325.

should be so rather than otherwise”³. So God’s inactivity in cases of indifferent advantage is presumably just a special instance of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). As has long been noted, however, the arguments in the Clarke correspondence that appeal to the PSR are entwined with other arguments employing another familiar Leibnizian principle, namely, the Identity of Indiscernibles (PII). Thus the above quotation from the third paper continues as follows:

“But if space is nothing else but this order or relation, and is nothing at all without bodies but the possibility of placing them, then those two states, the one such as it is now, the other supposed to be the quite contrary way, would not differ at all from one another. Their difference therefore is only to be found in our chimerical supposition of the reality of space in itself. But in truth, the one would exactly be the same thing as the other, they being absolutely indiscernible, and consequently there is no room to inquire after a reason for the preference of the one to the other”⁴.

In the context of the Clarke correspondence, this two-track argumentative strategy makes perfect sense. In order to construct an effective *r e d u c t i o* of the Newtonian view, Leibniz must first grant it enough coherence to generate premises suitable for reduction to absurdity. This he does by supposing that possible universes might differ only in their location and orientation in absolute space and time. This is easily shown to be absurd because it requires God to prefer one particular location and orientation over others that are equally advantageous, in violation of the PSR. Once the *r e d u c t i o* is complete, and the relational view of space and time vindicated, Leibniz is in a position to point out that the original supposition also violates the PII. As the claim that indiscernibles are identical amounts, in this context, to the claim that two universes cannot differ merely in their spatio-temporal location and orientation, this is a doctrine that his opponent is hardly likely to admit at the outset, and this explains why Leibniz does not simply dismiss the Newtonian view as incoherent *a b i n i t i o*.

Clarke responds by pointing out that Leibniz’s own relational view of space does not rule out the existence of constituent parts of the universe differing only in their spatial or temporal properties. He assumes, or at least pretends to assume, that Leibniz will concede this point in relation to various atoms of the same substance, which he takes to be instances of particles that are qualitatively identical but numerically distinct. Leibniz, unsurprisingly, refuses to knuckle under. But rather than merely deny the existence of atoms, he takes the objection seriously by rehearsing the same pattern of supposition, *r e d u c t i o* and subsequent re-confirmation of the identity of indiscernibles, all this time within the framework of his own metaphysics:

“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

3 *Leibniz’ drittes Schreiben* (s. 2); GP VII, 363; Ariew/Garber, 324.

4 *Leibniz’ drittes Schreiben* (s. 5); GP VII, 364; Ariew/Garber, 325.

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”⁵.

The conclusion here falls short of the PII when interpreted as the claim that it is logically impossible that there be bodies that are equal and perfectly alike, but Leibniz goes on to make up this deficiency by stating flatly: “To suppose two things indiscernible is to suppose the same thing under two names”⁶. However, in the fifth paper, under further pressure from Clarke, Leibniz retracts, conceding that two indiscernible bodies are not absolutely impossible, but only contrary to divine wisdom⁷.

Broad, in his penetrating account of the correspondence, suggests that Leibniz contented himself for controversial purposes with showing that the Newtonian view, including the claim that there are atoms, conflicted with the PSR and so could be rejected in favour of the relational view of space and time, and also felt able to point out that on the relational view the Newtonian view was meaningless. But Broad speculates that Leibniz’s deeper view was that the absolute conceptions of space and time were meaningless *ab initio* because they violated the PII, and hence were subjects barely fit for the kinds of *r e d u c t i o* to which he subjects them in the course of the dispute with Clarke⁸.

Ignoring Leibniz’s deeper view for the moment, we might wonder whether Leibniz’s concession over the possibility (though not the actuality) of indiscernible but non-identical parts of the universe does some damage to his argument about the universe as a whole. If there can be parts of a universe that are equal and perfectly alike, why can’t there be whole universes made up of such parts? But Leibniz has no real problem here. Clarke’s response to Leibniz’s *r e d u c t i o* is a *t u q u o q u e*, and all Leibniz needs to do to escape the accusation that his own relational view of space must allow indiscernible but non-identical parts of the universe is to deny that in the actual universe there are any such parts. By contrast, it is hardly open to anyone to deny that there is a universe at all. If the Newtonian view were true, God would have to have chosen a particular location and orientation for the universe in space and time over others as advantageous, on pain of not creating a universe at all. The cost of avoiding choosing an order for parts of a universe that are equal and perfectly alike is merely that no such parts are created. That there is a universe is obvious; that there are atoms much less so. So Leibniz can concede, for the purposes of argument, that there might have been two indiscernible things whilst maintaining that, thanks to the PSR, we can be confident that in fact there are not.

5 *Leibniz’ viertes Schreiben* (s. 3); GP VII, 372; Ariew/Garber, 327.

6 *Leibniz’ viertes Schreiben* (s. 6); GP VII, 372; Ariew/Garber, 328.

7 See *Leibniz’ fünftes Schreiben* (s. 25); GP VII, 394-395; Ariew/Garber, 334.

8 See C. D. Broad: *Leibniz’s Last Controversy with the Newtonians*, in: R. S. Woolhouse (ed.): *Leibniz: Metaphysics and Philosophy of Science*, Oxford 1981, pp. 157-174, here p. 166.

Nevertheless, I think that there is an issue of some significance here. If the absolute conceptions of space and time are not immediately to be convicted of incoherence on the grounds that they violate the identity of indiscernibles, then perhaps they can also be salvaged from the criticism that they conflict with the PSR. Consider the following passage, from Leibniz's fifth paper:

"And therefore, one must not say as the author [i. e., Clarke] does here, that God created things in what particular space and at what particular time he pleased. For all time and all spaces being in themselves perfectly uniform and indiscernible from each other, one of them cannot please more than another"⁹.

On the relational view, and presuming the identity of indiscernibles, this talk of "all" and "one [...] more than another" makes no sense, for uniform and indiscernible times and spaces are not several but one. So here we are dealing with the absolute view of space and time, granted enough coherence for the *r e d u c t i o* to gain its force. The appeal to the PSR then gets its purchase from the absurdity of the suggestion that God might find one particular space or time more pleasing than another without those spaces or times having anything to recommend them over any others. Clarke swallows this consequence, maintaining that free agents can choose one of a number of indifferent options by a 'mere act of will'¹⁰. Leibniz's reaction is predictable: he points out that any determination between options that are indifferent violates the PSR. But perhaps Clarke is on to something here, or at least, perhaps he should have been. Although it would indeed be difficult to claim that any one space and time could please God more than all others because it was better than all others, Clarke could nevertheless resist the suggestion that all times and spaces are indiscernible in themselves.

For example, if space is absolute, then there are also distinct locations and directions within this space, like here as opposed to there, or west and its opposite east. Two possible universes, indiscernible in terms of all their internal properties and relations, can nevertheless be differentiated by their location relative to here or there and their orientation relative to these directions. All this, indeed, seems to be conceded by Leibniz at the start of the *r e d u c t i o* from the third paper quoted above, and is entailed by Clarke's claim that "Two Places though exactly alike, are not the same Place"¹¹. If these two possible universes are different, albeit only in their spatial location and orientation, then of course an omniscient God knows that they are. So why can't this difference in orientation provide God with a reason for creating one of them rather than the other?

Leibniz's reply to this suggestion would obviously be that, even if he were to concede the reality of such a difference, it would not provide a reason for

9 *Leibniz' fünftes Schreiben* (s. 60); GP VII, 406; Ariew/Garber, 342.

10 See *Clarke's dritte Entgegnung* (s. 2, 5, 7 and 8); GP VII, 367, 369 and *Clarke's vierte Entgegnung* (s. 1 and 2); GP VII, 381.

11 *Clarke's vierte Entgegnung* (s. 13); GP VII, 384.

God to prefer one of these differently oriented universes to another, for this difference does not give one universe any advantage over the other. But I want to postpone consideration of this reply until a couple of others have been canvassed. So what else might Leibniz say here? He could, of course, refuse to concede the reality of the difference, citing the PII as his authority. But that would deprive his *reductio* of the premise that is to be reduced to absurdity through showing its inconsistency with the PSR. It is also hardly likely to impress Clarke, who rejects the PII. If we recall the strategy employed by Leibniz in dealing with the possibility of atoms, we could perhaps construct a response along these lines: a different spatial orientation for an otherwise identical possible universe is just like a different spatial or temporal position for an otherwise identical part of a universe, i. e., not absolutely impossible, but contrary to the divine wisdom. Thanks to the PSR, we can be sure that there are in fact no non-identical indiscernibles in existence; so we can also be sure that the universe is not in fact distinguished from other possible universes only by its orientation in absolute space. But this line of thought is either unintelligible or else it collapses into the obvious reply mentioned above. On the Newtonian view of space, every possible universe must be located at some place and oriented in some particular direction, and there must be other possible universes exactly like this one except for their spatial location and orientation. If some possible universes are in absolute space whilst others, including the one that God in fact chose, are not, then we would have an exact parallel with the case of some possible universes containing indiscernible non-identicals but the actual universe containing no such things. But this suggestion will not work: it makes the absoluteness of space altogether too relative to do justice to the Newtonian position. So the only way that we could be sure that the universe differed from other possible universes by more than its orientation in space would be if it is not oriented in space at all, i. e., if there is no space in which it can be said to be oriented. So consideration of the divine wisdom in this case does lead to the absolute impossibility of universes differing only by their spatial orientations.

Back, then, to the obvious reply. Faced, as God would be if the Newtonian view were true, by two possible universes oriented east-west and west-east respectively, Leibniz claims that God would create neither because neither has any advantage over the other. Clarke's suggestion is that God, having reason to create one or another, but no reason to create one rather than another, selects one arbitrarily, and does so by an act of will. Leibniz responds that such acts of 'mere will' are fictions: willing always involves a motive for so willing; willing one rather than another requires a correspondingly discriminatory motive. This response is presented as following straightforwardly from the PSR. But why cannot the different spatial orientation itself provide a suitably specific motive for God's creative decree here? Looked at independently of this orientation the two possible universes are exactly alike, and in a case of such absolute indifference there is no foundation for choice, and so no possibility of willing. But once spatial orientation is included the case is not one of absolute indifference, or not obviously so. And yet Leibniz is quite confident that the PSR applies

with equal force here.

The conclusion should be, I think, that Leibniz took the PSR to rule out the possibility of God willing one of two alternatives that were equally advantageous, where 'advantage' means something like 'degree of perfection'. Differences that do not amount to any increase or decrease in degree of perfection, where possible, cannot provide a motive for God to will one outcome rather than another. If such differences were possible in the case of space and time (which of course on the relational view they are not) God would end up creating nothing at all, and there would be no created things, spiritual or material. But there are material and spiritual things, so such differences cannot be possible (and the relational view must therefore be true).

All of this is familiar, and also does not seem to get us much further than simply observing, as I did at the start, that Leibniz often appeals to God's inactivity in cases of indifference in the course of his arguments. But there is a question of some moment waiting in the wings here. Is God's inactivity in the face of incompatible but equally advantageous alternatives merely an application of the PSR, as I have so far regarded it, or does it involve both the PSR and what is usually referred to as the Principle of Perfection or the Principle of the Best (I shall adopt, for reasons to do with the assonance of my title, the latter expression)? The answer depends on how one interprets the PSR and on the logical relation of the PSR to the Principle of the Best. As both these issues have been the subject of a certain amount of controversy, perhaps a consideration of these questions will help to resolve some of these disputes.

According to Nicholas Rescher, the PSR is to be understood as claiming that all true propositions are analytic. The distinction between necessary and contingent truths is made according to whether the analysis that shows the containment of the predicate in the subject is finite (necessary truth) or infinite (contingent truth)¹². For Rescher, the PSR is the keystone of Leibniz's philosophical system, locked in place by the Principle of Identity, the guarantor of necessary truths, and the Principle of the Best, the guarantor of contingent truths. On this reading, it is the Principle of the Best (henceforward, PB) that is Leibniz's principle of contingency, supplying the complementary principle of definiteness that the PSR requires in cases where the analysis of a proposition goes to infinity. The PSR and the PB are logically independent, the first demanding only that the infinite analysis of contingent truths converge on something, and the second telling us on what it is that these analyses in fact converge¹³.

If God's inactivity in cases of indifferent advantage flows solely from the PSR and without reference to the PB then Rescher must have characterised the PSR incorrectly. Return to the case of the east-west and west-east possible universes, setting aside again what is probably Leibniz's deep view that this

12 See N. Rescher: *Leibniz, an Introduction to his Philosophy*, Oxford 1979, pp. 23-27.

13 See *ibid.*, p. 34.

supposition is meaningless. If the PSR leaves entirely open the question as to what principle of definiteness is to complement it, as Rescher claims, then Clarke would seem to have an easy way out here. Rather than adopting the PB, which will of course lead to the impasse that Leibniz describes because neither universe is better than the other, God can instead freely adopt a ‘Principle of the West’ as a principle of contingency, and this will ensure that a sufficient reason is available for preferring one universe over the other (say, the one oriented to the west). Or perhaps God can adopt the Principle of the West in addition to PB. Leibniz’s demonstration that the Newtonian conception of space conflicts with the PSR is, on the Rescher reading, not really a demonstration of this at all, for it is clearly the PB that drives the claim that God will not create except for reasons of advantage, whereas the PSR merely claims that God will not create without a reason of some sort or other. Clarke’s resort to an act of ‘mere will’ on God’s part, a move that Leibniz regarded as desperate, therefore looks extremely promising, and does not in fact involve a repudiation of the PSR, as Leibniz claimed. The disagreement is, instead, over the PB. And from the fact that Clarke was willing to contemplate God’s choice of one rather than another in cases where God had reasons of advantage only to prefer one or another, we might not be stretching the truth all that much in attributing to Clarke the claim that God can supplement the PB with further, tie-breaking principles of definiteness without violating the strictures of the PSR.

It seems obvious that, had Clarke realised that it was the PB that was driving Leibniz’s *r e d u c t i o* of the Newtonian conceptions of space and time, he would have simply rejected the PB. And it is odd, if Leibniz was as clear about the logical independence of the PB from the PSR as Rescher is, that he presented arguments as dependent on the latter that really depended on the former. Even odder, perhaps, is the fact that Rescher himself sees Leibniz’s *r e d u c t i o* as employing only the PSR and not also the PB¹⁴. Could these oddities result from the fact that we have continually set aside Leibniz’s deep view that the Newtonians are indulging in impossible fictions when they entertain the possibility of qualitatively indiscernible particles or universes that are nevertheless distinguishable by their spatial and temporal properties?

If the status of the PII were never an issue in the correspondence, then this interpretation might be plausible, but of course this is not so. Leibniz knows perfectly well that this is a principle that Clarke does not accept. And Leibniz is generally rather careful not to beg the question against the Newtonian position by claiming the principle at the outset. This is why, when Clarke introduces the possibility of atoms as an objection against the relational view of space, Leibniz is outraged: “But it is a manifest begging of that question to suppose that perfect

14 According to Rescher, “Leibniz’ central argument against the independent reality of space and time is that this would violate the Principle of Sufficient Reason” and he cites the passage from *Leibniz’ drittes Schreiben* (s. 5), quoted above in illustration. See Rescher (see note 12), pp. 88-89.

likeness, which, according to me, cannot be admitted"¹⁵. Broad reconstructs Leibniz's strategy in the case of the argument over indiscernible particles as follows:

"I can see that the supposition that there are two things exactly alike is self-contradictory; but, even if you will not grant me this, I can show from the Principle of Sufficient Reason that God never would create two such things and therefore that the supposition will always be false"¹⁶.

The demonstration here must depend upon the claim that God will do nothing in cases of indifferent advantage, because appeal to the PII is explicitly forgone. Broad has no problem in seeing the argument as dependent upon the PSR alone because he interprets the PSR so as to include the PB¹⁷. But if, as Rescher claims, the PB is logically independent of the PSR, then Leibniz's argument depends upon smuggling into the premises a principle that Clarke has not admitted. If the excuse for this deception is that the original supposition is self-contradictory in virtue of its conflict with the PII, that involves a begging of the question quite as outrageous, though considerably less manifest, as any of which Clarke was guilty.

The situation seems to be this: either Leibniz consistently concealed the role of the PB in the correspondence with Clarke because he knew that Clarke would not accept it, and so presented arguments as involving only the PSR when in fact they involved the PB as well; or the arguments involve the PB only in so far as it is logically dependent upon the PSR, and God's indifference in the case of equally advantageous but incompatible alternatives flows from the PSR itself. If the latter, then the Rescher interpretation of the PSR is wrong.

Rescher, as noted above, regards Leibniz's central argument against the absolute conceptions of space and time as reliant upon the PSR alone rather than in concert with the PB. He then notes that "[t]he independence of time would further violate the Principle of Perfection, for, if this were possible, God might have created the world sooner, thus increasing the amount of existence, and hence of perfection"¹⁸. But, given Rescher's characterisation of the PSR, I can see no reason to think that the PB is any less involved in the central argument than in its subsidiary. Rescher's PSR implies only that God must have some reason or other for his choice between alternatives. It is the PB that specifies that this reason must be one related to advantage. Equally advantageous alternatives are indifferent only to a being who has already elected to treat differences other than ones of advantage as beneath notice. If there can be differences between alternatives that are unrelated to advantage, then Rescher's PSR requires supplementation in order to underwrite the central argument against the independent reality of space and time. If there cannot be such differences, then the PSR is irrelevant, because all cases of indifferent advan-

15 *Leibniz' fünftes Schreiben* (s. 21); GP VII, 393-394; Ariew/Garber, 333.

16 Broad (see note 8), p. 163.

17 See *ibid.*, pp. 161-162.

18 Rescher (see note 12), p. 89.

tage are utterly indiscernible and hence identical. Either way, Leibniz is pulling the wool over Clarke's (and our) eyes, for the crucial principle at stake is the PB, or else the PII, but never Rescher's PSR.

Rescher's PSR, I conclude, is not Leibniz's PSR, or at least not Leibniz's PSR as it appears in the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence. The principle at work there is one that permits, without supplementation, the derivation of the claim that God will not create except for reasons of advantage. And this means, I think, that the PB is not logically independent of the PSR. The only alternative to this conclusion is to interpret much that Leibniz says within the correspondence as dishonest. Russell, perhaps, would have been willing to entertain this alternative if he had needed to, but the issue never arose: Russell, like Broad, subsumed the PB under the PSR¹⁹. Rescher thinks it unfortunate to charge an author with more mistakes than is absolutely necessary²⁰, and the same goes for attributions of insincerity. But if the PB is not independent of the PSR, then the PB cannot be Leibniz's principle of contingency. How then does Leibniz escape a fatalism as heretical as Spinoza's?

The answer to that question is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are a number of obvious suggestions: other worlds remain possible in themselves, i. e., considered independently of any divine decrees; or it may be contingent that there is a best possible world, as opposed either to no best or several such; or it may be contingent that this particular world is the one that outranks all the others. These suggestions may not yield an account of contingency that is as philosophically satisfying as one in which God supplements the Principle of Sufficient Reason by freely subscribing to the Principle of the Best. But they are likely to be closer to Leibniz's own views.

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19 See B. Russell: *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, London ²1937, p. 34. As Rescher notes, similar views are held by Couturat, Erdmann, Latta and Joseph; see Rescher (see note 12), pp. 34-35.

20 See Rescher (see note 12), p. 19.