

# Space, Individuation and the Identity of Indiscernibles: Leibniz's Triumph Over Strawson

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## Summary

After explaining several presuppositions of Strawson's metaphysics, I explicitly state his central argument against Leibniz. Once we correctly understand the role of perspective (first person, third person and ideal observer) from which individuating acts may be performed, Leibniz can undermine Strawson's theory of individuation by attacking these presuppositions. By turning the tables on Strawson, I show that not only is his objection to Leibniz's account of individuation ineffective, but his own theory cannot adequately respond to a revision of the chessboard counterexample he deploys against Leibniz. This results in the discovery that Strawson's attack on Leibniz and some defenses of Leibniz against Strawson (including one made in a recent contribution to this journal) have misinterpreted the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles in such a way as to give Strawson far too much dialectical ground.

Strawson has leveled an argument having to do with chessboards and points of view against a Leibnizian theory of individuation. He focuses his attack on the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (hereafter PII) by developing his intuition that it is possible that several monads have the same perspective and experience all the same perceptual states, i.e. can be indiscernible. I will analyze this argument and two previous attempts to defend Leibniz from it (an appeal to the apperceptive abilities of monads and an appeal to the material instantiation of monads) and show that detractors and defenders alike crucially misrepresent PII. A three-fold distinction between perspectives from which the act of individuation is performed will assist in developing the most philosophically and textually defensible interpretation of PII.

I begin by examining from Leibniz's perspective Strawson's positive view

that individuation is possible because material objects are basic particulars that I can locate relative to myself in space. Picking up Leibniz's banner, I argue that Strawson commits himself to a nexus of assumptions about absolute space, the concept of **place** and the epistemic abilities of persons which are untenable for reasons Leibniz has articulated. I then show that Strawson's position cannot overcome a variation on the central objection he himself raises against Leibniz. This approach improves upon other attempts to extricate Leibniz from Strawson's web because it will be more faithful to the intent of Leibniz's analysis of PII by correctly identifying the objects it ranges over and the subject from whose perspective PII is employed.

## **1. The Failure of Strawsonian Individuation on Leibniz's Terms**

After describing the salient aspects of Strawson's 'descriptive metaphysics' pertaining to the task of individuation, I will state and explain his argument against Leibniz.

**A. Strawson's Theory of Individuation.** Throughout the first chapter of **Individuals** Strawson develops his position in terms of what I will refer to as 'third person' identification. A hearer individuates object X from object Y with the help of words from a speaker. Strawson's modes of individuation, descriptive and reidentificative, supervene upon demonstrative identification, which is basic. Demonstrative identification amounts to picking out uniquely a particular in my local environment via sensible discrimination. This is

facilitated by locating the object's position in space and time relative to my own location. In contrast to Leibniz's view, with demonstrative identification at the ready individuation need not (and cannot) "rest ultimately on description in purely general terms." (S 9)

The particular with respect to which I individuate others is myself. Strawson ostensibly discusses Third Person individuation, but tacitly presupposes that my ability to perform First Person individuation—that is, to be capable of individuating myself from all else—is conceptually prior to Third Person individuation. Strawson remarks that

It is quite possible. . .to identify, e.g., events and processes without any dependence on identification of particulars of other types. . . [Such identifying acts] involve no reference to any other particular at all, except at most for the discountable implicit references to hearer and speaker. . .  
(S 36)

However, Strawson has not provided reason to believe these "implicit references" needed to generate a privileged frame of a reference are so easily "discountable".

Strawson's account refers to the role of space in individuation, which plays a crucial role in his transcendental argument:

It seems that we can construct an argument from the premise that identification rests ultimately on location in a unitary spatio-temporal framework of four dimensions, to the conclusion that a certain class of particulars is basic. . . (S 28)

Material bodies are necessarily the basic particulars of this framework because

they possess the requisite “fundamental characteristics”: three-dimensionality, endurance through time, and observability. (S 29) Apparently these traits are “fundamental” in the sense of being necessary for a proper description of our conceptual scheme.

Such particulars will be identifiable (and reidentifiable) by me in relation to my place in the unified framework of space and time. In order for material bodies to be identifiable in relation to us, however, we must occupy a special conceptual position in this scheme along with the bodies—not only must persons be material, to have a place, but persons must also **know** the location of this place. Persons must possess this epistemic ability because, according to Strawson, we can seamlessly move from demonstrative identification of bodies to descriptive identification of bodies (since we do individuate objects that do not reside in our immediate vicinity). In order to identify an object without ostending the object, a person must know her position relative to other objects. They then serve as reference points with which she can identify the original object. (S 27-28) The key requirement is that any descriptive reference using other particulars can be reduced to demonstrative reference.

The foregoing considerations require Strawson to give persons pride of place in two ways. He takes as ontologically basic the presence of beings with both mental and physical properties, and he holds that Third Person individuation is conceptually preceded by First Person individuation. This is because reference to material bodies requires “implicit references to hearer and speaker.” First and foremost, I am capable of individuating material bodies in virtue of their spatial and temporal relations to me, which leads Strawson to

hold that one's self is a basic constituent in his metaphysic.

Persons are instrumentally fundamental for Strawson's solution to the problem of massive reduplication. This problem was originally what motivated him to take demonstrative identification, as opposed to descriptive identification, as basic in his metaphysic. Describing the problem of "massive reduplication" that he would later employ against Leibniz, Strawson remarks:

[O]ne may be very well informed about a particular sector of the universe. One may know beyond any doubt that there is only one particular thing or person in that sector which answers to a certain general description. But this . . . does not guarantee that the description applies uniquely. For there might be another particular, answering to the same description, in another sector of the universe. (S 7-8)

To avoid this problem Strawson makes descriptive individuation supervenient on its demonstrative cousin, which leads him to hold that we know what sector of space a particular occupies by relating that sector uniquely to the sector we occupy. (S 9)

We are now in a position to appreciate the way in which Strawson uses facts about persons and space in his argument against Leibniz. He proceeds by conjoining key Leibnizian positions that, together, generate unwelcome implications for symmetrical universe cases. In contrast to Leibniz, "identifying reference to particulars rests ultimately on the use of expressions that, directly or indirectly, embody a demonstrative force." (S 117) Strawson begins his argument by noting that according to the identity of indiscernibles,

(P1) "it is necessarily true that there exists, for every individual, some

description in purely universal, or general, terms, such that only that individual answers to that description.” (S 120) (premise from Leibniz)

The remainder of the argument proceeds as follows:

(P2) The “basic individuals” are immaterial monads. (S 121) (premise from Leibniz)

(P3) So, each monad can be individuated without the use of demonstrative terms. (from (1) and (2))

(P4) For Leibniz, individuation per (P3) takes place in virtue of the “point of view” of each monad. (premise from Leibniz)

(P5) It is possible to have “qualitatively indistinguishable” points of view in a symmetrical universe. (S 122) (shown by the chessboard thought experiment)

(P6) So, “monads cannot be individuated by the views of the world which they get.” (S 123) (i.e., Leibniz’s account of individuation in (P4) is false.)

The key premise is (P5), making a description of the chessboard thought experiment necessary. Strawson asks us to conceptualize the “location” of immaterial monads as spaces on a chessboard. Strawson claims that attempts to individuate monad #22’s point of view from that of monad #43 point will fail because we can imagine symmetrical universes in which the two points of view are qualitatively indistinguishable. Since monads and their points of view must be described in purely general terms, Leibniz’s attempt at non-demonstrative individuation fails. Says Strawson,

It is necessary only to imagine the universe in question being repetitive or symmetrical in certain ways in order to see that there might be numerically different points of view from which the scenes presented would be qualitatively indistinguishable even though they comprehended the entire universe. (S 120)

The point of view from a certain position on the board (when made appropriately symmetrical) will thwart any attempt to individuate particulars because the view from this position and its mirror image will be identical.

As yet the argument is incomplete because Strawson has not explicitly identified the perspective from which the individuating acts are to be performed. We must draw distinctions between types of individuation, without which we will be guilty, like Strawson, of conflating importantly different perspectives. Within the confines of the Strawson-Leibniz dialectic the following three perspectives have the most currency.

**Third Person individuation:** individuation of X from Y by Z, where Z's point of view is in the world with X and Y (where X and Y can be either persons or objects).

**Ideal Observer individuation:** individuation of X from Y by an ideal observer whose point of view is outside the world composed of X and Y.

**First Person individuation:** individuation of X from Y by X (where X and Y are both persons).

The above argument concludes that Leibniz does not provide **First Person individuation** for monads. In other words, the assumption is that objects

under analysis falsify PII so long as those objects are indiscernible for the person performing the analysis. On the chessboard, monad 22 cannot distinguish itself from monad 43.

That the truth of PII is necessarily indexed to the perspective of he who does the individuating is a deeply mistaken assumption in regard to the importance of perspective in this context. Both detractors and defenders of Leibniz make this assumption and so focus on evaluating the applicability of PII rather than its truth **simpliciter**. By doing so these authors entangle the epistemological task of individuating objects with the metaphysical status of objects **per se**.

Strawson's strategy is to presuppose a frame of reference from a first-person perspective, assume that persons are primitives, and then individuate three-dimensional objects on the basis of their relationships to persons (or at least to one person) in a frame of reference described relative to my position in it. Some may be convinced that simply showing Strawson must presuppose a privileged frame of reference and the three-dimensionality of bodies for the success of his transcendental argument is itself sufficient to crown Leibniz the winner of this exchange. This amounts to a confession that to improve upon Leibniz, Strawson needed to help himself to an extensive array of powerful, yet dubious, metaphysical primitives. However, there are several devastating arguments against Strawson's position which exploit the presuppositional contours of his transcendental metaphysic that we might adduce with Leibniz's blessing.

**B. A Leibnizian Argument Against Strawsonian Individuation.** From



Leibniz's perspective the most serious problem plaguing Strawson's attempts to individuate is that persons will have no hint about which frame of reference they occupy. Suppose my sector of space, the Earth, is duplicated and the duplicate is placed in a universe which is qualitatively identical to this one. Suppose I am on this duplicate but do not know I am. The computer I am using is qualitatively identical to the one I was using on Earth, my children behave in just the ways they always have, etc. Now when I demonstratively identify the desk before me as my desk I err. My desk bears the same demonstrative relation to me, **by my lights**, that it did minutes ago. The proposition expressed by my utterance: 'This desk is the same one I was using moments ago' is false, but the important point is that demonstratives are at a loss to aid me in knowing that it is false.

Strawson is ostensibly doing 'descriptive' metaphysics in an attempt to explain how we actually individuate objects in our conceptual scheme. The only kinds of individuation in which the descriptive metaphysician (as opposed to the revisionary, Leibnizian metaphysician) is interested are First and Third Person individuation. The insuperable problem for Strawson is that **the "common axes" (S 10) Strawson thinks so helpful for individuation within the domain of descriptive metaphysics are only helpful for Ideal Observer individuation—an ideal observer who is able to know which universe and which sector of space he occupies.**

Whether Strawson is using "common axes" to refer to a coordinate system implemented into a relational space or to the grid-like divisions in a metaphysically real absolute space, we in the world have no access to these

“common axes”. He nearly admits this, though without appreciating its consequences: “When we become sophisticated, we systematize the framework with calendars, maps, co-ordinate systems; but the use of such systems turns, fundamentally, on our knowing our own place in them.” (S 12-13) To this he adds: “nothing in what I say has the consequence that a man is unable to identify a particular unless he can give precise spatio-temporal locations for it.” (S 13) But this is to miss an important point. We are not requiring of Strawson’s persons that they uniquely describe a coordinate location in absolute space in order to individuate objects. (Such a criticism would, I concur, miss the mark.) My point instead is that faced with reduplication cases, a person will be “unable to identify a particular” if he cannot determine which spatio-temporal network **he himself** occupies. If a **sector** of space itself is duplicated, as opposed merely to a particular in that sector (a possibility Strawson suggested in his argument against Leibniz), then the only way I will be able to know where that sector is, is by first knowing where I am. Description fails, and demonstrative identification presupposes epistemic access to facts to which I am necessarily not privy.

The way in which Bernard Williams weighs in on this score aids us in seeing the force of this point. Williams argues that Strawson’s assumptions about the epistemic ability of persons to determine their location are inadequate. He believes that Strawson’s appeal to indexicals and demonstratives will not assist in individuation unless those considerations can uniquely relate the person doing the individuating to the environment in which the objects exist. The consequence is that “this relating will rely on reference to

some other particulars, such as the Greenwich meridian.” By using this and other standards of measurement, I will be able to calculate the temporal distance I have traveled from the meridian, thus calculating the hour.

Williams believes, however, that taking this step would not significantly aid Strawson. If I must demonstratively identify my own location via the Greenwich meridian in order to identify when and where I am, why can I not instead “get on just as well by merely identifying the Greenwich meridian?” In other words, there is no obvious theoretical need for an intermediary in our attempt to individuate a place or time. If we can successfully identify a standard of measurement demonstratively, then why can we not successfully identify objects, positions and times demonstratively? We should not need other particulars in order to identify our own location in space and time since Strawson believes we are capable of identifying other earthly particulars **solely** on the basis of demonstratively individuating ourselves in the framework of space and time. Williams’ appeal to temporal and spatial reference-fixing conventions, on Strawson’s behalf, makes idle the special status of persons.

These considerations are persuasive in their own right, but it is important for understanding my grievance with Strawson to observe a way in which Williams might have pushed Strawson further. I argue that **even if** I was conferred the ability to identify a temporal or spatial reference-fixing standard in my world, this would still fail to provide Strawson a means of overcoming the massive reduplication problem. To illustrate, suppose I and, in a nearby world, my doppelgänger point to the Greenwich meridian (and its twin) and utter “I am pointing at the Greenwich meridian.” We will not know whether we are

successfully pointing to **the** Greenwich meridian. Even with Williams' suggested emendation, Strawson will not be able to surmount the reduplication problem he foists on Leibniz. Securing First Person and Third Person individuation is insufficient to solve that problem. Strawson is forced, unwillingly to be sure, into providing only an account of Ideal Observer individuation.

This problem arises from a modification of Strawson's chessboard thought-experiment. In Strawson's chessboard scenario, monad #22 cannot successfully perform First Person individuation, and so cannot determine whether its point of view is shared by monad #43 because it is in a symmetrical universe. Strawson thinks he can avoid such cases by allowing himself the use of demonstratives, but he believes Leibniz succumbs to the chessboard case because PII forces Leibniz to use only general terms. But some person X in the chessboard-like grid of a "unitary spatio-temporal framework" (S 29) will be incapable of performing First (or Third) Person Individuation, despite proficiency with demonstrative terms. This is because X will not be capable of determining where she is on the chessboard when we switch her from place to symmetrical place while maintaining the qualitative identity of her perspective. The only means by which X can pick out and reidentify one of two qualitatively identical objects requires her to know which frame of reference she occupies—a task impossible for a finite mind. This leaves Strawson precisely where he left Leibniz. Only God can successfully individuate objects (with any measure of certainty), because only someone standing outside of (or within) all the possible universes will be able to chart the movements of objects and persons between

them. Strawson believes this result serves as a reductio on Leibniz's interpretation of PII. Far from being a reductio of PII, this merely confirms **Leibniz's interpretation** of PII. To this I will shortly return.

## **2. The Failure of Leibnizian Individuation on Strawson's Terms**

Strawson's positive view on demonstrative individuation is incapable of surmounting a problem intimately related to the argument he uses against Leibniz's PII, but this has left as an open question whether Strawson's argument shows that Leibniz's PII is false.

There is a noteworthy attempt to rescue Leibniz from Strawson's argument that has appeared, if in inchoate form, in the literature. With a proper appreciation for the apperceptive abilities with which Leibniz endowed monads, one can contend that in symmetrical universes a monad would be capable of uniquely identifying itself reflexively. My interest in this option, one not considered by Strawson, is increased because there is persuasive evidence that the historical Leibniz was favorably disposed to this maneuver. Nonetheless, I argue that this defense of Leibniz conflates First Person individuation with Ideal Observer individuation, misidentifying Leibniz's intentions in this regard. This discussion will point us to a crucially important confusion in Strawson with regard to PII.

**A. Apperception.** Strawson notes that monads are individuated by (and equivalent to) their perception of the entire universe, their 'point of view.' But it

is natural to think that some monad, Y, appears in its own point of view. Alexander Pruss, in a recent contribution to this journal, and Clifford Brown both believe this move succeeds in showing that Strawson's argument can be overcome.

Clifford Brown argues that, for Leibniz, the "individuality of my perception of my body thus establishes the individuality of my perception of every particular body in my world." Two embodied monads cannot be indiscernible because self-identify automatically differentiates them. He thus combines an appeal to the material instantiation of monads with reference to their apperceptive abilities--an argumentative strategy also shared by Pruss.

Placing the percipient in his own perception in this way is a move Leibniz himself emphasizes. Consider this passage:

[A]lthough each created monad represents the whole universe, it represents more distinctly the body which is particularly affected by it and of which it is the entelechy. And as this body expresses the whole universe by the connection between all matter in the plenum, the soul also represents the whole universe in representing the body which belongs to it in a particular way.

Whether an appeal to apperception can do the argumentative work Pruss and Brown both believe it can, though, is a separate matter.

Through an appeal to a type of apperceptive ability among monads, Brown tacitly claims that Leibniz can justify First Person **and** Third Person individuation. In other words, apperceptively locating myself in my point of view not only enables me to identify myself as distinct from others, but it also

allows me to differentiate one object from another. If this is accurate, then Leibniz can overcome Strawson's argument by denying (P5).

**Pace** Pruss and Brown, such a ploy will not overcome Strawson's argument once it is suitably refurbished. The irony here is that Brown and Pruss attempt to defend Leibniz by interpreting him in such a way that his considered view is remarkably similar to Strawson's position. Brown combines the fact that monads are embodied in the actual world with the fact that monads possess internal perceptual abilities in order to make his case against Strawson's argument. He points us to a text in which Leibniz criticizes Locke's theory of personal identity with a counterexample strikingly similar to Strawson's symmetrical universe case. Leibniz asks us (well before Kant, Max Black and Strawson did the same) to imagine a universe that is "in no way sensibly different" from this one—the people of this universe seem identical to us. Since my consciousness will be manifested in two bodies, I must be identical with my double, but this is absurd, says Leibniz. What is missing in Locke is an appreciation for an "internal **principle of distinction**." "[A]lthough time and place (i.e. the relations to what lies outside) do distinguish for us things which we could not easily tell apart by reference to themselves alone," Leibniz contends that "things are nevertheless distinguishable in themselves." Brown's case is confusing because he seems to think that embodiment is primarily responsible for the individuation of monads, but embodiment alone is otiose in responding to Strawson's argument. (See note 12.)

Strawson would surely grant that monad #22 is not identical with monad #43, **and** he will grant that #22 sees itself in its point of view of the universe.

What he would deny is that this fact allows Leibniz to individuate the two. This is so because the result of using this apperceptive ability is not something that can be specified in “purely universal, or general, terms”. An appeal to apperception relies on facts that antecedently and uniquely identify at least one monad without using merely general terms—the monad that is me. Strawson would then accuse Leibniz of giving up his commitment to being able in principle to individuate any two monads or monadic aggregates on the basis of their intrinsic qualities, which is tantamount to giving up the Identity of Indiscernibles as formulated in (P1). Brown identifies Leibniz’s goal as arguing for **First Person individuation**, yet the costs are too high if Leibniz must forsake the Identity of Indiscernibles.

**B. First-person Epistemology and PII.** Strawson’s exposition of his descriptive metaphysics tacitly asserts that, when X and Y are individuable, I will be able to individuate them. I have argued his justification for attributing this ability to us relies on assumptions against which Leibniz argued. Pruss believes I, a human being, am able to individuate any two objects “in principle”, no matter how qualitatively similar they appear to me. This is because “my complete individual concept” includes “the whole state of the universe,” which in turn includes the differences between the pair of objects in question.

Were the gentleman to whom Leibniz refers in an anecdote from the Clarke correspondence to have found two leaves in a garden “perfectly alike”, that discovery would **not** imply the falsity of PII. Because two objects are indiscernible by the human eye, it does not follow that the objects are identical. Pruss mistakenly believes that if two objects are not “in principle empirically



recognizable” by “any entity in the universe other than God”, Leibniz’s views about PII are inconsistent. This is to misunderstand Leibniz in a way that gives Strawson far too much ground.

As a matter of historical fact, Leibniz thought that human beings often cannot discriminate between individuals. Indeed, Leibniz firmly goes further.

You see, paradoxical as it may seem, it is impossible for us to know individuals or to find any way of precisely determining the individuality of any thing. . . For any set of circumstances could recur, with tiny differences which we would not take in; and place and time, far from being determinants by themselves, must themselves be determined by the things they contain. The most important point in this is that individuality involves infinity, and only someone who is capable of grasping the infinite could know the principle of individuation of a given thing.

This decides the matter: Leibniz did not intend PII to be constrained by the epistemic and perceptual abilities of human beings. That **I** cannot distinguish between two leaves on the basis of their intrinsic features (and not, for instance, on their location relative to me) is irrelevant for evaluating the truth of PII.

The prevalence of this misinterpretation is lamentable, but the fact that Strawson’s chessboard example has the same fate is more important for present purposes. Even if I am unable empirically to differentiate myself from my doppelgänger in a symmetrical universe, PII is not falsified. These examples would only be forceful if they show that not even God, he “who is capable of grasping the infinite,” is able to individuate objects. They fall short of doing

this.

I argued above that Strawson is unable to account successfully for First and Third Person individuation without making presuppositions Leibniz argues against, and that Strawson is only able to explain Ideal Observer individuation. This is unfortunate given that the project of descriptive metaphysics is to “describe the actual structure of our thought about the world.” (S xiii) Indeed, Strawson as descriptive metaphysician scorned attempts to account for individuation in any other way. He bitingly indicts Leibniz for PII’s dependence on God, saying that the individuals of Leibniz’s system “are particulars who can only by the grace of God be, even theoretically, identifyingly referred to.” (S 123) Leibniz’s position “makes the possibility of individuation rest upon a **theological** principle,” Strawson adds. (S 124; his emphasis)

Strawson attacks Leibniz’s account of PII with the problem of symmetrical universes only to see that when this problem is resurrected, it buries his own. By duplicating entire sectors of space, demonstrative reference will not succeed in showing how a person in one of the sectors would know he is in sector A rather than sector B. Ironically, the standards for individuation set by Strawson for Leibniz cannot be met by Strawson’s own account.

Leibniz differs radically on the methodology of the metaphysician and not without reason. The nature of monadic reality leads Leibniz to give humankind and the “actual structure” of our thought little creative role in the process of individuation. We can see reasons for this in the failures of Strawson. The explanatory inadequacies in the Strawsonian, descriptive metaphysic point to the astonishing staying power of the Leibnizian system.

### 3. Scoring the Exchange

The historical assessment of the dialectic is clear. We must declare Leibniz the winner. First, the domain of types of objects for Leibniz is at the outset much smaller than Strawson's. In this sense, Strawson is forcing Leibniz into an unfamiliar game. For instance, tables and chairs are mere aggregates and, though the status of aggregates in Leibniz's mature period is a matter of some controversy, by most accounts these are not the sorts of objects that are in principle individuable. The objects Leibniz considered aggregates are precisely those that, for Strawson, are the paradigms of Third Person individuation. Leibniz rightly thought to ask the prior question: Do such non-organic bodies possess a principle of unity which makes them things, as opposed to mere phenomena? Leibniz, try as he might, could not find a reason to answer in the affirmative; Strawson takes for granted that there is such a principle. Monads cannot be serious contenders for individuation performed by finite minds, so only corporeal substances remain. Perhaps here Strawson can take Leibniz to task for his failure to account for the individuation of aggregates. Nonetheless, there is much more to Leibniz's metaphysics than individuable objects. Of considerable importance is the fact that most **entia** for Leibniz are not the sorts of things that can be individuated by humankind. That is not the case for Strawson. Indeed, the central focus of Strawson's book is to argue for individuation of bodies and as I have argued, this he cannot do.

Lastly, not only does Strawson fail at accounting for individuation (at the descriptive, First and Third person levels) of bodies and persons, he also fails despite using more (and more questionable) primitives than does Leibniz. Bodies, three-dimensional and in time, are real and basic according to Strawson. His use of persons is also presumptive, both with regard to the fact that their basic status is derived from abstruse considerations about transcendental conditions, and because, according to Strawson, the same object can have both mental and physical properties.

Though Leibniz finishes with a exceedingly intricate metaphysical system replete with corporeal substances and monads, God and entelechies, aggregates and phenomena, he was not in the business of taking rich, substantive entities as primitive. And the existence of the class of entities he did take as primitive, the monads, he thought best explained several features of mereological and mathematical analysis. Strawson's bloated metaphysic does less with more for reasons Leibniz seems to have anticipated.

## **Notes**