

Primitive Thisness and Primitive Identity

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Is the world—and are all possible worlds—constituted by purely qualitative facts, or does thisness hold a place beside suchness as a fundamental feature of reality? Some famous philosophers—Leibniz, Russell, and Ayer, for example—have believed in a purely qualitative constitution of things; others, such as Scotus, Kant, and Peirce, have held to primitive thisness. Recent discussions of direct, nondescriptive reference to individuals have brought renewed interest in the idea of primitive, nonqualitative thisness. I am inclined to accept primitive thisness, but for reasons that do not depend very heavily on recent semantics. In the present essay I will try to justify my position—but even more to sort out some issues that are easily and often confused. ...

I. Thisness and Suchness

Three notions that we will use call for some elucidation at the outset. They are the notions of an *individual*, of a *thisness*, and of a purely qualitative property or (as I shall call it) a *suchness*.

By 'individual' here I mean particulars such as persons, physical objects, and events. It is assumed that numbers and universals are not individuals in this sense, and that particular places and times are individuals if they have an absolute being and identity independent of their relation to particular physical objects and events.

A thisness is the property of being identical with a certain particular individual—not the property that we all share, of being identical with some individual or other, but my property of being identical with me, your property of being identical with you, etc. These properties have recently been called "essences," but that is historically unfortunate; for essences have normally been understood to be constituted by qualitative properties, and we are entertaining the possibility of nonqualitative thisnesses. In defining 'thisness' as I have, I do not mean to deny that universals have analogous properties—for example, the property of being identical with the quality red. But since we are concerned here principally with the question whether the identity and distinctness of individuals is purely qualitative or not, it is useful to reserve the term 'thisness' for the identities of individuals.

It may be controversial to speak of a "property" of being identical with me. I want the word 'property' to carry as light a metaphysical load here as possible. 'Thisness' is intended to be a synonym or translation of the traditional term 'haecceity' (in Latin, '*haecceitas*'), which so far as I know was invented by Duns Scotus. Like many medieval philosophers, Scotus regarded properties as components of the things that have them. He introduced haecceities (thisnesses), accordingly, as a special sort of metaphysical component of individuals. I am not proposing to revive this aspect of his conception of a haecceity, because I am not committed to

regarding properties as components of individuals. To deny that thisnesses are purely qualitative is not necessarily to postulate "bare particulars," substrata without qualities of their own, which would be what was left of the individual when all its qualitative properties were subtracted. Conversely, to hold that thisnesses are purely qualitative is not to imply that individuals are nothing but bundles of qualities, for qualities may not be components of individuals at all.

We could probably conduct our investigation, in somewhat different terms, without referring to thisnesses as properties; but the concept of a *suchness* is not so dispensable. Without the distinction between the qualitative and the nonqualitative, the subject of this paper does not exist. I believe the concept, and the distinction, can be made clear enough to work with, though not, I fear, clear enough to place them above suspicion.

We might try to capture the idea by saying that a property is purely qualitative—a *suchness*—if and only if it could be expressed, in a language sufficiently rich, without the aid of such referential devices as proper names, proper adjectives and verbs (such as 'Leibnizian' and 'pegasizes'), indexical expressions, and referential uses of definite descriptions. That seems substantially right, but may be suspected of circularity, on the ground that the distinction between qualitative and nonqualitative might be prior to the notions of some of those referential devices. I doubt that it really is circular, in view of the separation between semantical and metaphysical issues for which I shall argue in section II; but it would take us too far afield to pursue the issue of circularity here.

There is another and possibly more illuminating approach to the definition of 'suchness'. All the properties that are, in certain senses, general (capable of being possessed by different individuals) and nonrelational are suchnesses. More precisely, let us say that a *basic suchness* is a property that satisfies the following three conditions. (1) It is not a thisness and is not equivalent to one. (2) It is not a property of being related in one way or another to one or more particular individuals (or to their thisnesses). This is not to deny that some basic suchnesses are in a sense relational (and thus do not fall in the Aristotelian category of Quality, though they count as "purely qualitative" for present purposes). An example may help to clarify this. The property of owning the house at 1011 Rose Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan, is not a basic suchness, although several different individuals have had it, because it involves the thisness of that particular house. But the property of being a homeowner is a basic suchness, although relational, because having it does not depend on which particular home one owns. (3) A basic suchness is not a property of being identical with or related in one way or another to an extensionally defined set that has an individual among its members, or among its members' members, or among its members' members' members, etc. Thus, if being an American is to be analyzed as a relation to a set of actual people and places, it is not a basic suchness. ...

II. The Leibnizian Position

Leibniz held, as I have suggested, that the thisness of each particular individual *is* a suchness. ... The purely qualitative conception of individuality stands or falls, rather, with a certain doctrine of the Identity of Indiscernibles.

The Identity of Indiscernibles might be defined, in versions of increasing strength, as the doctrine that no two distinct individuals can share (1) all their properties, or (2) all their suchnesses, or (3) all their nonrelational suchnesses. Leibniz takes no pains to distinguish these three doctrines, because he holds all of them; but it is only the second that concerns us here. The first is utterly trivial. If thisnesses are properties, of course two distinct individuals, Castor and Pollux, cannot have all their properties in common. For Castor must have the properties of being identical with Castor and not being identical with Pollux, which Pollux cannot share." The third doctrine, rejecting the possibility of individuals differing in relational suchnesses alone, is a most interesting thesis, but much more than needs to be claimed in holding that reality must be purely qualitative. Let us therefore here reserve the title 'Identity of Indiscernibles' for the doctrine that any two distinct individuals must differ in some suchness, *either* relational *or* nonrelational.

I say, the doctrine that they *must* so differ. Leibniz commonly states this principle, and the stronger principle about relations, in the language of necessity. And well he might; for he derives them from his theory of the nature of an individual substance, and ultimately from his conception of the nature of truth, which he surely regarded as absolutely necessary. He was not perfectly consistent about this. He seemed to admit to Clarke that there could have been two perfectly indiscernible things. But, as Clarke remarked, some of Leibniz's arguments require the claim of necessity. And it is only if necessity is claimed, that philosophically interesting objections can be raised to the Identity of Indiscernibles. For surely we have no reason to believe that there actually are distinct individuals that share all their qualitative properties, relational as well as nonrelational.

Here we are concerned with the necessary connection between the Identity of Indiscernibles, in the sense I have picked out, and Leibniz's conception of thisnesses as suchnesses. If individuals are *infimae species* [lowest species], then "the principle of individuation is always some specific difference"; individuals must be distinguished by their suchnesses. Conversely, the clearest way of proving the distinctness of two properties is usually to find a possible case in which one would be exemplified without the other. In order to establish the distinctness of thisnesses from all suchnesses, therefore, one might try to exhibit possible cases in which two things would possess all the same suchnesses, but with different thisnesses. That is, one might seek counterexamples to refute the Identity of Indiscernibles.

Indeed a refutation of that doctrine is precisely what is required for the defense of nonqualitative thisnesses. For suppose the Identity of Indiscernibles is true. And suppose further, as Leibniz did and as believers in the doctrine may be expected to suppose, that it is true of possible worlds as well as of individuals, so that no two possible worlds are exactly alike in all qualitative respects. Then for each possible individual there will be a suchness of the disjunctive form:

having suchnesses S_{i1} in a world that has suchnesses S_{w1} , *or*
having suchnesses S_{i2} in a world that has suchnesses S_{w2} , *or* . . .

which that individual will possess in every world in which it occurs, and which no other individual will possess in any possible world. This suchness will, therefore, be necessarily equivalent to the property of being that individual, and, since there will be such a suchness for every individual, it follows that every individual's thisness will be equivalent to a suchness. . .

III. The Dispersal Arguments Against the Identity of Indiscernibles

The standard argument against the Identity of Indiscernibles, going back at least to Kant is from spatial dispersal. Max Black's version is fairly well known. We are to imagine a universe consisting solely of two large, solid globes of iron. They always have been, are, and always will be exactly similar in shape (perfectly spherical), size, chemical composition, color—in short, in every qualitative respect. They even share all their relational suchnesses; for example, each of them has the property of being two diameters from another iron globe similar to itself. Such a universe seems to be logically possible; hence it is concluded that there could be two qualitatively indiscernible things and that the Identity of Indiscernibles is false.

Similar arguments may be devised using much more complicated imaginary universes, which may have language users in them. Such universes may be perfectly symmetrical about a central point, line, or plane, throughout their history. Or they may always repeat themselves to infinity in every direction, like a monstrous three-dimensional wallpaper pattern.

The reason that is assumed to show that the indiscernibles in these imaginary universes are not identical is not that they have different properties, but that they are spatially dispersed, spatially distant from one another. The axiom about identity that is used here is not that the same thing cannot both have and lack the same property, but that the same thing cannot be in two places at once—that is, cannot be spatially distant from itself.

An argument for the possibility of non-identical indiscernibles, very similar to the argument from spatial dispersal, and as good, can also be given from *temporal* dispersal. For it seems that there could be a perfectly cyclical universe in which each event was preceded and followed by infinitely many

other events qualitatively indiscernible from itself. Thus there would be distinct but indiscernible *events*, separated by temporal rather than spatial distances. And depending on our criteria of transtemporal identity, it might also be argued that there would be indiscernible persons and physical objects, similarly separated by temporal distances. ...

IV. Arguments From the Possibility of Almost Indiscernible Twins

We may just have an intuition that there could be distinct, though indiscernible, globes in these circumstances. But there may also be an argument for this view—which will depend in turn on other intuitions, like all arguments in these matters. The argument might rest on an intuition that the possibility of there being two objects in a given spatiotemporal relation to each other is not affected by any slight changes in such features as the color or chemical composition of one or both objects. If we accept that intuition, we can infer the possibility of indiscernible twins from the uncontroversial possibility of *almost* indiscernible twins. No one doubts that there could be a universe like the universe of our example in other respects, if one of the two globes had a small chemical impurity that the other lacked. Surely, we may think, the absence of the impurity would not make such a universe impossible.

Spatiotemporal dispersal still plays a part in this argument. But one can argue against the Identity of Indiscernibles from the possibility of almost indiscernible twins in quite a different way, using an example that has to do primarily with minds rather than with bodies. Suppose I have an almost indiscernible twin. The only qualitative difference between him and me, and hence between his part of the universe and mine, is that on one night of our lives (when we are 27 years old) the fire-breathing dragon that pursues me in my nightmare has ten horns, whereas the monster in his dream has only seven. I assume that the number of horns is little noted nor long remembered, and that any other, causally associated differences between his and my lives and parts of the world are slight and quite local. No doubt there is a possible world (call it *w*) in which there are almost indiscernible twins of this sort; it is only an expository convenience to assume that I am one of them and that *w* is actual. But if such a world is even possible, it seems to follow that a world with perfectly indiscernible twins is also possible. For surely I could have existed, and so could my twin, if my monster had had only seven horns, like his. And that could have been even if there were no other difference from the lives we live in *w*, except in the details causally connected with the number of horns in my dream. In that case we would have been distinct but qualitatively indiscernible—a relation which seems therefore to be logically possible.

Several points in this argument call for further mention or explanation. (1) The non-identity obtaining between me and my twin in *w* is proved by a qualitative difference between us there. (2) The argument depends on an intuition of transworld identity—that in a possible world (call it *w'*), otherwise like *w*, but in which my dragon has only seven horns, there could exist an

individual identical with me and an individual identical with my twin, even though we would not be qualitatively different in that case. (3) The transitivity of identity is relied on in arguing that since my twin and I are not identical in w (as shown by the difference in our suchnesses there), it follows that we are not identical in any possible world, and therefore are distinct in w' , if we both exist in it.

(4) Because differences in modal properties can be purely qualitative, the conclusion that my twin and I would be qualitatively indiscernible in w' depends, additionally, on the assumption that in w' he as well as I would be a person who could have dreamed of a ten-horned monster in the circumstances in which I did in w . In other words, it is assumed that if w and w' are possible, so is a world w'' just like w except that in w'' it is my twin's beast that has ten horns and mine that has seven. (More precisely, it is assumed that w and w'' would be equally possible if w' were actual.) The implications of the supposition that there are possible worlds that differ, as w and w'' do, only by a transposition of individuals will be studied further in section v, below.

(5) But we may notice here a consideration about time that seems to me to support assumptions (2) and (4). The mutual distinctness of two individual persons already existing cannot depend on something that has not yet happened. The identity and non-identity of most individuals, and surely of persons, are conceived of as determined, at any time of their existence, by their past and present. This is doubtless connected with the importance that origins seem to have in questions of transworld identity. Consider the state of w when my twin and I are 22, five years before the distinctive dreams. We are already distinct from each other, though nothing has yet happened to distinguish us qualitatively. I think it follows that our mutual distinctness is independent of the qualitative difference arising from our later dreams. We would be distinct, therefore, even if our dreams did not differ at age 27—that is, even if we were perfectly indiscernible qualitatively, as we would be in w' . Moreover, since my twin and I have our identities already established by age 22, which of us is which cannot depend on which has which dream five years later; it is possible that the seven-horned monster trouble my sleep, and the ten-horned his, when we are 27, as in w'' . This argument depends, of course, on the assumption that in w my twin and I have histories that differ qualitatively during a certain period after we are 22, but not before then. It follows that w is not completely deterministic, but that does not keep w from being at least logically possible.

V. Primitive Transworld Identity

Issues of modality *de re* turn on identity questions. To say that a certain individual is only contingently a parent, but necessarily an animal, for example, is to say that there could have been a non-parent, but not a non-animal, that would have been the same individual as that one. It has become customary, and has been at least heuristically helpful, to represent such identities as identities of individuals in different possible worlds—

"transworld identities" for short—although (as we have just seen) modal claims *de re* can be understood as identity claims even without the imagery of possible worlds. Whether modality *de re* really adds anything important to the stock of modal facts depends, I think, on whether there are transworld identities or non-identities, and if so, whether they are primitive or are rather to be analyzed in terms of some more fundamental relation(s) among possible worlds. I will try to show here that, if we are prepared to accept nonqualitative thisnesses, we have a very plausible argument for primitive transworld identities and non-identities. ...

If ... we reject the Identity of Indiscernibles in favor of nonqualitative thisnesses, it will not be hard to find examples that will provide support of great intuitive plausibility for primitive transworld identities and non-identities. Consider, again, a possible world *w*₁, in which there are two qualitatively indiscernible globes; call them Castor and Pollux. Being indiscernible, they have of course the same duration; in *w*₁ both of them have always existed and always will exist. But it seems perfectly possible, logically and metaphysically, that either or both of them cease to exist. Let *w*₂, then, be a possible world just like *w*₁ up to a certain time *t* at which in *w*₂ Castor ceases to exist while Pollux goes on forever; and let *w*₃ be a possible world just like *w*₂ except that in *w*₃ it is Pollux that ceases to exist at *t* while Castor goes on forever. That the difference between *w*₂ and *w*₃ is real, and could be important, becomes vividly clear if we consider that, from the point of view of a person living on Castor before *t* in *w*₁ and having (of course) an indiscernible twin on Pollux, it can be seen as the difference between being annihilated and somebody else being annihilated instead. But there is no qualitative difference between *w*₂ and *w*₃. And there are no qualitative necessary and sufficient conditions for the transworld identity or non-identity of Castor and Pollux; for every qualitative condition satisfied by Castor in *w*₂ is satisfied by Pollux in *w*₁, and vice versa.

A similar example can be constructed for transworld identity of *events*. Suppose all that happens in *w*, is that Castor and Pollux approach and recede from each other in an infinite series of indiscernible pulsations of the universe. In *w*₁ their pulsations go on forever, but they might not have. For every pair of them there is surely a possible world in which one member of the pair is the last pulsation, and a different possible world in which the other is the last pulsation. But there is no qualitative difference between these possible worlds; each contains the same number (the first infinite number) of exactly similar pulsations. There are therefore no qualitative necessary and sufficient conditions for the transworld identities and non-identities of the events in these possible worlds.

Any case of this sort, in which two possible worlds differ in the transworld identities of their individuals but not in their suchnesses, provides us at once with a clearer proof of a primitive transworld identity ... One might try to analyze the transworld identity of an individual in terms of qualitative similarities plus having the same parts, or the same parents; but then the transworld identity of some individuals (the parts or the parents) is

presupposed. If the Identity of Indiscernibles is rejected, there seems to be no plausible way of analyzing transworld identity and non-identity in general in terms of other, more basic relations.

VI. Thisness and Necessity

I have argued that there are possible cases in which no purely qualitative conditions would be both necessary and sufficient for possessing a given thisness. It may be thought that this is too cautious a conclusion—that if thisnesses are nonqualitative, there cannot be any qualitative necessary conditions at all for possessing them. ...

The conclusion, that there cannot be any purely qualitative necessary condition for the possession of any given thisness, is absurd, however. It implies that you and I, for example, could have been individuals of any sort whatever—plutonium atoms, noises, football games, places, or times, if those are all individuals. If we cannot trust our intuition that we could not have been any of those things, then it is probably a waste of time to study *de re* modalities at all. If there are any transworld identities and non-identities, there are necessary connections between thisnesses and some suchnesses. ...

Perhaps the best answer that can be given to the question, What makes it necessary that Jimmy Carter (for example) is not a musical performance? is this: It is a fact, which we understand very well to be true, though not analytic, that Jimmy Carter is a person. And there are necessary conditions of intra- and transworld identity which follow (analytically, indeed) from the concept or property of being a person and which entail that no individual that is in fact a person could under any circumstances be a musical performance.

There are many notoriously perplexing questions about what suchnesses belong necessarily to which individuals. "Could Cleopatra have been male?" "Could I (who am blue-eyed) have been brown-eyed?" And so forth. It may be that some of these questions call for conceptual legislation rather than metaphysical discovery, for some of our concepts of kinds of individual may be somewhat vague with respect to necessary conditions of transworld identity. The acceptance of nonqualitative thisnesses does not oblige us to settle doubtful cases in favor of contingency. Indeed I am inclined to decide a very large proportion of them in favor of necessity (or impossibility, as the case may be).

If a name is desired for the position I have defended here, according to which thisnesses and transworld identities are primitive but logically connected with suchnesses, we may call it *Moderate Haecceitism*.