

The Metaphysics of Individuality and the Sciences

In recent years, the discussion of the notion of individuality has been intense in the philosophy of science, and a number of interesting results have been obtained. However, by and large, both the methodological presuppositions and the metaphysical background have been left implicit. The consequence of this is that the actual significance of both the discussion and the results is not entirely clear. In this paper, I will try to remedy - at least partly - this situation. In particular, by making reference to the recent debate about identity and individuality in physics, I will examine the assumptions underlying recent defences of 'reductive' accounts of a Leibnizian and/or contextual sort. I will suggest that these assumptions are not as compelling as they may seem at first - even from the naturalistic perspective that requires our philosophy to be informed by our best science. Consequently, I will argue, the non-reductive, 'primitivist' account of identity and individuality as something primitive and non-further-analysable can be positively re-evaluated - at least to some extent. The overall picture that emerges, I contend, is that of a 'pluralistic' approach, according to which different scientific domains and theories are likely to admit of, and in fact require, different forms of individuality.