

# Leibniz's Theory of Space in the Correspondence with Clarke and the Existence of Vacuums (1)

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## Leibniz's Theory of Space in the Correspondence with Clarke and the Existence of Vacuums (1)

**ABSTRACT:** It is well known that a central issue in the famous debate between Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Samuel Clarke is the nature of space. They disagreed on the ontological status of space rather than on its geometrical or physical structure. Closely related is the [disagreement](#) on the [existence](#) of vacuums in nature: while Leibniz denies it, Clarke asserts it. In this paper, I shall focus on Leibniz's position in this debate. In part one, I shall reconstruct the theory of physical space which Leibniz presents in his letters to Clarke. This theory differs from Leibniz's ultimate metaphysics of space, but it is particularly interesting for systematic reasons, and it also gave rise to a lively discussion in modern philosophy of science. In part two, I shall examine whether the existence of vacuums is ruled out by that theory of space, as Leibniz seems to imply in one of his letters. I shall confirm the result of E. J. Khamara ("Leibniz's Theory of Space: A Reconstruction," *Philosophical Quarterly* 43 [1993]: 472-88) that Leibniz's theory of space rules out the existence of a certain kind of vacuum, namely extramundane vacuums,

although it does not rule out vacuums within the world.

## Introduction

It is well-known that a central issue in the famous debate between Gottfried [Wilhelm](#) Leibniz and Samuel Clarke is the nature of space. Leibniz and Clarke, who did not only take a Newtonian standpoint, but was even assisted in designing his answers to Leibniz by Sir Isaac Newton himself, (2) disagree on the ontological status of space rather than on its (geometrical or physical) structure. Closely related to the disagreement on the ontological status of space is a further disagreement on the existence of vacuums in nature: While Leibniz denies it, Clarke asserts it.

In this paper I shall focus on Leibniz's position in the debate about these issues. In the first part I shall try to reconstruct the theory of physical space which Leibniz presents in his letters to Clarke. In the second part I shall examine, whether the existence of vacuums is ruled out by that theory of space, as Leibniz seems to imply in one of his letters (see below).

To focus exclusively on the correspondence with Clarke is a confinement I am aware of. The theory which I am going to reconstruct differs from Leibniz's ultimate metaphysics of space, (3) but it is particularly interesting for systematic reasons and it also gave rise to a lively discussion in modern philosophy of science.

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