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Principle of Sufficient Reason



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Related Topics

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Introduction

Our need to understand the world, and our place in it, drives both philosophy and science. But to what extent is our world intelligible? According to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (“PSR”), everything is—at least in principle—intelligible. Everything has an explanation, even if that explanation may not be accessible to us. While the Principle of Sufficient Reason was not known by that label until the seventeenth century, the principle’s provenance goes at least as far back as Parmenides, and discussions that exploit the principle are to be found in medieval philosophers like Aquinas, Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides. But the principle takes center stage in the early modern era. It is in this period that we find direct engagement with the PSR. A first task of this entry will thus be to bring to the fore the nature of the early modern commitment to this principle, and the arguments for and against it. A second task will be to highlight how historical discussions of

the PSR have shaped—and continue to shape—contemporary philosophy.

This entry will proceed as follows. In the next section, “[Proponents](#),” I discuss the views, as well as some arguments, developed by three early modern PSR proponents: Spinoza, Leibniz, and du Châtelet. The following section, “[Contemporary Proponents](#),” examines a few contemporary arguments for the PSR. Lastly, the section on “[The PSR in Contemporary Debates](#)” discusses some ways in which the PSR has influenced contemporary philosophy.

Proponents

Spinoza

Spinoza is both one of the earliest and also one of the most thoroughgoing early modern proponents of the PSR. While Spinoza’s philosophy is both radical and original, the nature of his commitment to the PSR involves both Cartesian elements as well as a commitment to elements of Medieval Jewish rationalism. Spinoza hints at the influence of the latter in his *Ethics*, where, in his discussion of parallelism, he says:

Some of the Hebrews seem to have seen this, as if through a cloud, when they maintained that God, God’s intellect, and the things understood by him are one and the same. (*Ethics* 2p7s; all references to Spinoza’s *Ethics* are from Spinoza 1994. The first numeral in references to Spinoza’s *Ethics* refers to parts. The letter ‘p’ refers to proposition, ‘c’ refers

to corollary, ‘d’ refers to demonstration, and ‘s’ refers to scholium.)

According to Seeskin (2018, p. 48), there is “near universal agreement” that this passage refers to Maimonides’s monism. For Spinoza, a commitment to monism is in part entailed by a commitment to the PSR. However, the extent to which Spinoza was influenced by Medieval Jewish rationalism should not be overstated, for Spinoza departs radically from Judeo-Christian orthodoxy. For Spinoza, God is not a transcendent creator of the universe, but an infinite being, and the universe’s many beings and entities exist as modes of this infinite being (*Ethics* Ip15).

The PSR is not explicitly stated in the axioms of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Nevertheless, Spinoza’s commitment to the PSR is arguably implicit in the statement of his axioms (see Lin 2017). When Spinoza explicitly formulates the PSR, he does so in terms of “cause” or “reason”:

For each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason [*causa seu ratio*], both for its existence and for its nonexistence (*Ethics* Ip11d2).

The disjunctive “cause or reason” is puzzling. Are “cause” and “reason” equivalent in meaning for Spinoza? Or are they distinct (perhaps overlapping) notions? For Spinoza, causation involves a conceptual connection (see *Ethics* Iax4, Ip6c2). For all x and y , x causes y if and only if there is a conceptual connection between the concept of x and the concept of y (see Della Rocca 2008; Lin 2017). A causal fact then is then a conceptual fact for Spinoza. Moreover, for Spinoza, a conceptual connection is explanatory (cf. *Ethics* Iax5, IIp5, IIp7s). Thus, effects are conceived or understood through their causes, i.e., a conceptual grasp of an effect requires a conceptual grasp of its cause (cf. *Ethics* Id3). Thus, it would seem that for Spinoza, a cause just is, or is very much like, a reason.

Given that for Spinoza causation is a conceptual, explanatory relation, what formal features does it have? For Spinoza, causation is necessitating and arguably irreflexive. Causation is necessitating just if it is governed by the following principle: if a causes b , then necessarily, if a obtains then b obtains. Given this principle, it follows that if a causes b , then if a necessarily

obtains then b necessarily obtains. Spinoza clearly espouses the principle in question:

From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow (*Ethics* Ia3).

This feature of causation plays an important role in Spinoza’s necessitarianism, the view that “[I]n nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way” (*Ethics* Ip29). For Spinoza, there is only one substance, God (*Ethics* Ip14), God exists necessarily (*Ethics* Ip7d), and everything is caused by God (*Ethics* Ip25–26, Ip28d). Given that causation is necessitating for Spinoza, it follows that if God causes everything, then everything is necessary. It is worth noting, however, that there is some disagreement in Spinoza scholarship over whether Spinoza is really committed to a full-blown necessitarianism (see especially Curley and Walski (1999); for a reply to them, see Garrett (2018)).

Is causation irreflexive for Spinoza? While Spinoza appears to endorse a notion of self-causation (*causa sui*), it is unclear whether self-causation involves a violation of irreflexivity. At *Ethics* Id1 Spinoza construes a “cause of itself” as “that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.” This suggests that God’s existence is explained by God’s essence. Put in terms of facts, the claim seems to be that the fact that God exists is explained by the fact that it is essential to God that he exists. Absent further assumptions—such as the assumption that God’s essence is identical to God—this does not constitute a violation of irreflexivity (at *Ethics* Ip20 Spinoza says that God’s existence and God’s essence are “one and the same,” but see Silverman (2017) for an argument for the claim that the “one and the same” relation in Spinoza should not be understood as one of identity). What might then explain the fact that it is essential to God that he exists? It may be that for Spinoza this fact is not apt for explanation. At *Ethics* Ip7 Spinoza says: “It pertains to the nature of a substance to exist.” Della Rocca (2008, p. 49) argues that Spinoza’s claim here is

that “each substance is such that its existence somehow follows from its very concept or nature.” If we then further ask why substances are such that their existence follows from their very concept or nature, the answer might just be: “that’s just what a substance is.” It is unclear, given his commitment to the PSR, whether Spinoza is permitted to simply assume that there is such an existence-involving concept or nature.

How broad is Spinoza’s PSR? Does it, for example, apply to only things, or only to facts about existence, or does it apply to any fact whatsoever? Daniel Garber has charged that Spinoza’s PSR is explicitly about the explanation of *things*, rather than facts, which suggests that Spinoza’s PSR has narrower scope than a PSR that concerns facts (see Garber (2015)). It suggests, for example, that while each thing (e.g., a red ball) has an explanation, facts concerning the ways those things are (e.g., the fact that the ball is red) do not. In response to Garber’s charge, Michael Della Rocca has argued that even if we distinguish facts and things (a distinction which, according to Della Rocca, Spinoza might not permit), on Spinoza’s view, a PSR that applies to things collapses into a PSR that applies to facts. For Spinoza, that there is an unexplained fact entails that there is an unexplained state of substance. And if Spinoza considers a state of substance to be a thing (which Della Rocca argues he does), then every time we have an unexplained fact we also have an unexplained thing. Hence, if there is no unexplained thing (as per a PSR that applies to things), there can be no unexplained fact (cf. Della Rocca (2015)). If Della Rocca is right, then Spinoza is committed to an unrestricted PSR on which no fact or thing is unexplained. Whether Spinoza’s philosophy lives up to the standards set by his own unrestricted PSR is another matter. But putting aside the question of whether Spinoza’s own philosophy is internally consistent, we will later see how Spinozistic thought has shaped central debates in contemporary metaphysics.

Leibniz

Leibniz, also a trenchant proponent of the PSR, is credited for the label “Principle of Sufficient Reason” (cf. Melamed and Lin 2016). Leibniz

formulates the PSR in several distinct ways: as the claim that nothing happens without reason (NE 179, AG 31); as the claim that nothing happens without a cause (AG 31, G. VII. 309); as the claim that every fact or true assertion has a sufficient reason for why it is thus and not otherwise (AG 217); as the claim that nothing happens without a sufficient reason that determines why it is so and not otherwise (AG 210); as the claim that “a reason must be given” for every truth (G. VII. 309); and as the claim that every truth has an a priori proof (G. VII. 309). These formulations differ in logical form (some are contrastive; others are not), in what they take to be the *explanandum* (some take the *explanandum* to be an event; others take it to be a fact or truth), and in what they take to be the *explanans* or sufficient reason (some take it to be a cause, others a reason, and at least one takes it to be an a priori proof).

One might be tempted to treat these various formulations as distinct principles. But at least one passage suggests that we should treat them as versions of the same principle:

There are two first principles of all reasonings, the principle of contradiction. . . and the principle that a reason must be given, i.e. that every true proposition, which is not known per se, has an a priori proof, or that a reason can be given for every truth, or, as is commonly said, that nothing happens without a cause. (G. VII. 309; this passage dates from around 1686, and is from an essay entitled “*Specimen inventorum de admirandis naturae Generalis arcanis*” (“A specimen of discoveries of marvelous secrets of a general nature”).)

In this passage Leibniz seems to equate three seemingly different kinds of *explanans*: having an a priori proof, having a reason, and having a cause. (Frankel (1986) also cites the passage at G. VII. 309 in support of her view that Leibniz treats the various versions of the PSR as versions of a single principle.)

Unlike Spinoza, who treats the PSR as an axiom and provides no explicit argument for why we should be committed to it, Leibniz presents at least three arguments for the PSR. Leibniz presents his first argument for the PSR in an early piece written between 1671 and 1672. This piece is called *Demonstratio Propositionum Primarum*

(“Demonstration of Primary Propositions”) in the Akademie edition. (The argument also occurs in *The Philosopher’s Confession* (A VI, iii, 118) and in Leibniz’s last letter to Clarke (Letter V, §18/LC 60).) Leibniz claims that the sufficient reason for a thing’s existence is just the totality of its necessary conditions, or requisites. Since a thing cannot exist without the requisites for its existence obtaining, anything that exists has a sufficient reason for its existence. In *Primary Truths*, Leibniz presents an argument for the PSR from his conceptual containment theory of truth. According to this argument, the PSR is entailed by the conceptual containment theory of truth. Leibniz says the following in his July 1686 letter to Arnauld:

[I]n every true affirmative proposition, whether necessary or contingent, universal or particular, the notion of the predicate is in some way included in that of the subject. *Predicatum inest subjecto*, otherwise I do not know what truth is. . . For there must always be some foundation for the connection between the terms of a proposition, and this must be found in their concepts. This is my great principle, with which I believe all philosophers should agree, and one of whose corollaries is the commonly held axiom that nothing happens without a reason which can always be given, why the thing has happened as it did rather than in another way, even though this reason often inclines without necessitating (Leibniz (1969): 337).

On the conceptual containment theory of truth, what makes each true proposition true is the fact that the proposition’s predicate is contained in its subject. This containment of predicate in subject is explicit in the case of identities (such as “A is A”), but needs to be shown through the analysis of concepts in the case of nonidentities (such as “A is B”). The sufficient reason for each proposition is an a priori demonstration that reduces the proposition to an identity, and it consists in substituting the terms of a proposition with definitions until we (or God) arrive at an identity. Since an a priori proof is for Leibniz a proof that exploits conceptual relations, a sufficient reason for Leibniz consists in such conceptual relations. This brings Leibniz’s conception of sufficient reason close to Spinoza’s conception. In his fifth letter to Clarke, Leibniz gives an inductive argument for the PSR (LC, L5.129). But earlier in the same letter

Leibniz also suggests that the PSR is not apt for proof (LC, L5.125). By contrast, Christian Wolff and Alexander Baumgarten, who were followers of Leibniz in Germany, thought it necessary to provide an argument for the PSR, and sought to derive the principle from the Principle of Contradiction (cf. Look 2011).

Like Spinoza, Leibniz is committed to the view that explanation is necessitating. Moreover, Leibniz’s conceptual containment theory of truth entails that all truths are analytic, and so necessary. But unlike Spinoza, Leibniz balks at the necessitarian conclusion that Spinoza seemingly embraces. Whether Leibniz really succeeds in avoiding that necessitarian conclusion is a matter of some debate. See Adams (1994) for a nuanced discussion of the evolution of Leibniz’s position on contingency and necessitarianism.

Finally, it is unclear whether Leibniz is committed to a violation of irreflexivity. On Leibniz’s view, the necessary being (i.e., God), carries “the reason of its existence with itself” (“Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason” §8/AG 210). Like with Spinoza, this claim may be construed as follows: God’s existence is explained by God’s essence, which is contained within God. Leibniz is thus not obviously committed to a violation of irreflexivity.

Du Châtelet

Emilie du Châtelet’s thoroughgoing commitment to the PSR is most evident in her 1740 text *Institutions de physique* (*The Foundations of Physics*). In this work—a text which is ostensibly a textbook for her son—du Châtelet seeks to provide the metaphysical foundations for Newtonian physics (see Detlefsen 2014; Brading 2019). In her preface to this important text, du Châtelet writes:

In the first chapters I explain to you the principal opinions of M. Leibniz on metaphysics; I have drawn them from the works of the celebrated Wolff, of whom you have heard me speak so much with one of his disciples, who was for some time in my household, and who sometimes made abstracts for me (du Châtelet (1740): XII).

But despite du Châtelet’s own claims to be expounding Leibnizian metaphysics, there are

significant ways in which both her understanding of the PSR and her metaphysics diverge from Leibnizian (or Leibniz's) metaphysics. Like Leibniz, du Châtelet introduces the PSR as a fundamental principle on par with the Principle of Contradiction:

The principle on which all contingent truths depend, and which is neither less fundamental nor less universal than that of contradiction, is *the principle of sufficient reason*. All men naturally follow it; for no one decides to do one thing rather than another without a sufficient reason that shows that this thing is preferable to the other (du Châtelet (1740): §8).

This superficial similarity with Leibniz notwithstanding, du Châtelet's discussion of the PSR is noticeably anthropocentric. For her, a sufficient reason is a reason that satisfies *us*, and that which makes *us* understand:

When asking someone to account for his actions, we persist with our own questions until we *obtain a reason that satisfies us*, and in all cases we feel that we cannot force our mind to accept something without a sufficient reason, that is to say, without *a reason that makes us understand why this thing is what it is, rather than something completely different* (du Châtelet (1740): §8, emphasis added).

But a reason that satisfies us need not be *the* sufficient reason for the existing of a thing or the obtaining of a fact in Leibniz's sense. Indeed, the standard for what satisfies us might be much lower than the standard for an ultimate explanation. Suppose you want to know why the sky is blue. Plausibly, an explanation in terms of light scattered by molecules in the earth's atmosphere would satisfy you. But such a reason would not qualify as a sufficient reason for Leibniz, for whom a sufficient reason is an ultimate explanation, and is to be found only in God (see, for example, "On the Ultimate Origination of Things"/AG 149). Indeed, du Châtelet (unlike Leibniz and *a fortiori*, Spinoza) thinks that a contingent state of affairs can provide the sufficient reason for another contingent state of affairs:

The different states of a simple being depend on one another, for, such a successive state being no more necessary than another, there must be a sufficient reason why such a state is actual, and why, rather in such a time than in any other. Now, this reason can

only be found in the preceding state, and the reason for that will be in the state antecedent to it, and so on back to the first (du Châtelet (1740): §129).

Du Châtelet's conception of a sufficient reason also seems to make what qualifies as a sufficient reason contingent on human psychology: the kind of reason that might satisfy at one time need not be the reason that satisfies us at another time. By contrast, what qualifies as a sufficient reason for Leibniz does not depend on human psychology. For Leibniz, a sufficient reason is a reason that an "all-knower" might be able to provide:

So far we have just spoken as simple *physicists*; now we must rise to *metaphysics*, by making use of the *great principle*, little used, commonly, that *nothing takes place without sufficient reason*, that is, that nothing happens without it being possible *for someone who knows enough things* to give a sufficient reason to determine why it is so and not otherwise ('Principles of Nature and Grace, Based on Reason' §7/AG 209-210, underline emphasis added).

For Leibniz, a sufficient reason need not satisfy *us*, and may even be inaccessible to us (see, for example, *Monadology* §31-32/AG 217). Amijee (2020) argues that this difference between Leibniz's and du Châtelet's conceptions of sufficient reason underlies their very different metaphysical views. She shows, for example, that this difference ultimately explains why Leibniz rejects inter-substantial causation, while du Châtelet embraces it.

Contemporary Proponents

There are few contemporary philosophers who defend the truth of the PSR (as opposed to philosophers who examine the nature and role of the PSR in the history of philosophy). This small group includes Della Rocca (2010, 2020), Pruss (2006), and Amijee (2017). Dasgupta (2016) also develops (though does not endorse) a version of the PSR. Of these contemporary discussants, Dasgupta (2016), Amijee (2017), and Della Rocca (2020) explicitly discuss a PSR formulated in terms of metaphysical explanation (or grounding, which some of these thinkers take

to be equivalent to, or at least coextensive with, metaphysical explanation). (See Fine (2001) for a representative discussion of grounding.) The versions of the PSR defended by Pruss (2006) and Della Rocca (2010) do not explicitly appeal to metaphysical explanation, but can nevertheless be understood in those terms. But what is metaphysical explanation? Roughly, it is the kind of explanation that tells us what makes it the case that a fact obtains. Consider the fact that objects persist over time. In virtue of what do they persist? According to a four-dimensional perdurantist, an object persists over time in virtue of the fact that it is a collection of temporal stages, and the fact that a temporal stage of the object at time t_1 is appropriately related to the temporal stage of that object at time t_2 (cf. Lewis 1986; Sider 2001). If this four-dimensionalist view is correct, these facts *metaphysically explain* our original fact by being those in virtue of which the original fact obtains. Metaphysical explanation has taken center stage in contemporary metaphysics. But the notion is hardly new to philosophy. The kind of explanation it is intended to pick out (the kind whose presence is often signaled by the locutions “in virtue of” or “because”) is both familiar and ubiquitous.

A central question I wish to address in the present section is this: Does a PSR formulated in terms of metaphysical explanation or grounding preserve the strength of the early modern rationalist’s PSR? At least one way of measuring the strength of a PSR is by its consequences. Does it, for example, entail necessitarianism or the existence of God? For instance, Pruss (2006) restricts his PSR to contingent truths, but insists that it still entails the existence of a necessary being. Another way to measure the strength of a PSR is by whether it trivializes intuitively substantive questions.

The version of the PSR developed by Dasgupta (2016) purports to avoid at least some of the formidable consequences that the PSR is traditionally taken to entail, but seems to trivialize certain substantive questions that fall under the scope of the traditional rationalist PSR. Because grounding sequences, on Dasgupta’s view, terminate in “autonomous” facts—facts that are not apt for grounding—Dasgupta’s version of the PSR

does not entail the existence of God. No fact needs to be ultimately grounded or metaphysically explained by a fact about the existence of God. Nevertheless, the paradigmatic example of an autonomous fact on Dasgupta’s view is an essentialist fact: a fact of the form *it is essential to x that p* . And such facts are generally taken to be necessary. Hence, given that Dasgupta endorses necessitation (the principle that if a grounds b , then necessarily if a obtains then b obtains), and despite his protestations that a kind of contingency is nevertheless preserved on the view he develops, Dasgupta’s version of the PSR entails necessitarianism.

Dasgupta’s PSR—along with perhaps any version of the PSR formulated in terms of grounding—seems to trivialize the question “why is there something rather than nothing?.” On the contemporary grounding framework, that there is anything is an existentially quantified fact explained by its instances, i.e., facts of the form *x exists*. But surely, this is not the kind of answer that we are after when we ask “why is there something rather than nothing?.” This kind of concern suggests that perhaps the early modern rationalists did not construe sufficient reason in the way we construe ground or metaphysical explanation. Perhaps sufficient reason for them is more akin (at least in this respect) to our contemporary notion of causal explanation: it seems misguided to answer the question “what caused there to be something?” by saying “the table,” where the table is one of the existing things. Alternatively, perhaps the fact that the standard view of how existentially quantified facts are grounded or metaphysically explained makes certain substantive questions trivial suggests that we ought to revise our grounding framework.

Unlike Dasgupta (2016), who develops a view on which a ground-theoretic PSR might be true but does not argue for it, Della Rocca (2010) provides an argument for the PSR. Della Rocca observes that there are uncontroversial examples of facts for which it is appropriate to demand an explanation. He argues that we frequently appeal to “explicability arguments”—arguments for the nonobtaining of certain states of affairs on the basis that such states of affairs would be

inexplicable. For instance, if we place equal weights on either side of a scale, we infer that one side will not hang down (assuming there are no defects in the scale). If one side were to hang down past the other, we would have an inexplicable state of affairs. Likewise, why think that neither lefty nor righty—fission offshoots in Parfit's (1984) thought experiment—are identical to the original person? Because the obtaining of the state of affairs in which the original person was identical to lefty rather than righty (or vice versa) would be inexplicable.

Della Rocca argues that accepting some explicability arguments puts pressure on one to accept an explicability argument concerning existence facts (facts of the form such-and-such state of affairs exists or obtains). But if all existence facts demand explanation, the PSR is true. Since explicability arguments seem appropriate in many cases, those who deny the PSR must provide a principled reason for why they are not appropriate in the case of existence facts. Della Rocca suggests that the challenge to provide such a principled reason cannot be met by opponents of the PSR. This sort of argument aims to shift the burden of proof from proponents of the PSR over to those who reject it.

It is not obvious which, if any, of the PSR's usual formidable consequences are shared by Della Rocca's PSR (though Della Rocca (2010) seems willing to endorse necessitarianism). And how would a world in which Della Rocca's PSR is true be structured? Would all facts be ultimately explained by God, or by some other self-explaining entity, or by autonomous facts (as per Dasgupta), or would we have to embrace an infinitely descending explanatory regress? Nonetheless, the world as conceived by Della Rocca (2010) certainly has explanatory structure. His recent work defends a more radical position. Della Rocca (2020) argues that a particular kind of Bradleyan explanatory demand with respect to the obtaining of relations entails a radical monism according to which there are no distinctions whatsoever. There are thus neither many things nor one thing—there is simply being. Such a view appears to entail that the world lacks structure, thus rendering moot the question of how a world in which

the PSR is true would be structured. Della Rocca further argues that the explanatory demand with respect to the obtaining of relations—and the failure to satisfy it—also commits us to an unrestricted PSR.

Amijee (2017) provides an argument for a *commitment* to the PSR—formulated in terms of metaphysical explanation—rather than for the principle's truth. Any argument for the truth of the PSR is also an argument for a commitment to it, on the assumption that we ought to be committed to what is true. However, an argument for a commitment to the PSR need not be an argument for its truth. Amijee shows that a familiar species of inquiry—"structural inquiry"—requires that those who participate in the practice seek metaphysical explanations for facts (where the domain of potential inquiry includes every fact). She then shows that participating in structural inquiry commits one to the PSR in two different ways: (1) it leads to the result that every fact is such that one is committed to its having a metaphysical explanation and (2) it leads to the result that one is committed to the claim that every fact has a metaphysical explanation. Finally, she shows that we ought to participate in structural inquiry, and so ought to be committed to the PSR. Amijee's argument echoes, at least in some respects, a strand in Kant's discussion of the PSR, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Just as Kant (1998) argues that the PSR is the ground of possible experience (see especially B/246/A201), Amijee treats a commitment to the PSR as a condition for the possibility of structural inquiry.

Amijee's argument leaves open what explanatory structure a world in which the PSR is true might have. Indeed, she argues that the PSR can be satisfied by a world containing nonterminating explanatory sequences. Moreover, it does not follow that we ought to be committed to the PSR holding in worlds other than our own.

The PSR in Contemporary Debates

Intelligibility

For Spinoza, sufficient reason is intimately connected with intelligibility and understanding.

As Della Rocca (2008) writes, for Spinoza, “to conceive of a thing is to explain it.” Also, as mentioned earlier, for Spinoza effects are understood or conceived through their causes. This suggests that for Spinoza, grasp of the *explanans* suffices for grasp of the *explanandum*. Put differently (and perhaps more strongly), the *explanandum* can be deduced a priori from the *explanans*. This type of view is perhaps not entirely alien in the contemporary grounding/metaphysical explanation framework. Fine (2012), for example, treats grounding as a relation akin to logical consequence. If grounding is like logical consequence, then it is not implausible to think that the *explanandum* can be deduced a priori from the *explanans*. However, most discussions of grounding or metaphysical explanation stop short of a commitment to the a priori deducibility of the *explanandum* from the *explanans* (though the *explanans* must, in some sense, illuminate why the *explanandum* obtains).

Does taking seriously the link between explanation and intelligibility (as Spinoza does) affect contemporary theorizing about metaphysical explanation? It turns out that how closely we relate explanation to intelligibility inevitably affects our views about what must figure in the *explanans* for a given thing or fact.

Della Rocca (2020) argues that it is in the nature of relations to be grounded in one or more of their relata. He further claims that because relations are by their nature grounded in one or more of their relata, they depend not only on their relata, but also on the grounding relation that obtains between the relation and the relevant relata. While Della Rocca does not draw an explicit connection to Spinoza here, the intuitive plausibility of the view he puts forward stems from construing grounding (and metaphysical explanation) in the way that Spinoza thought of sufficient reason—as a reason that makes its *explanandum* intelligible. Compare: In order to grasp what makes it the case that *p*, it would not be enough to simply grasp its ground. One would need to grasp the ground *as* a ground for the fact that *p*. This suggests that in order to grasp what makes it the case that *p*, one must not only grasp its ground, but also grasp the relationship between

the ground and the grounded (i.e., the fact that *p*). Construing grounding as very tightly connected to intelligibility thus informs views about what ought to figure in a full ground or metaphysical explanation for a fact.

Likewise, if we eschew the Spinozist link between the ground and grounded and settle for something weaker, we in turn end up with fewer constraints on what must figure in a full ground. For instance, Amijee (2021) argues that the fact it is raining at 3 pm on July 31, 2019 can fully ground the fact that it is raining now (on the assumption that it is now 3 pm on July 31, 2019). Absent further premises, there is no way to deduce the *explanandum* from the *explanans* in this case, though the *explanans* nevertheless illuminates why it is raining now (i.e., it tells us what makes it the case that it is raining now).

Reality Without Distinctions

What implications does taking the PSR seriously have for contemporary metaphysics outside debates over the nature of metaphysical explanation? As mentioned earlier, Della Rocca (2020) contends that the PSR entails that there are no distinctions. He argues that any distinction invokes a relation, but that relations (and relational facts)—on pain of explanatory circularity or a vicious regress—introduce brute facts into our metaphysical systems. Della Rocca’s monism has radical consequences. It ultimately entails the demise of metaphysical explanation itself, for explanation is itself a relational notion.

If Della Rocca is right, then most of our ordinary presuppositions are false. There is not *really* a keyboard that Sakina is typing on that is distinct from the other objects that surround her, and there is not *really* a *Sakina* that is distinct from *you*. But it sure seems to us like there are distinctions out in the world. What then accounts for the fact (if it is a fact) that we are suffering from a massive illusion?

In response, Della Rocca might reject the question’s presupposition. He might argue that the question itself relies on a distinction between how things are and how they seem to us—a distinction that his view rejects (along with every other distinction). But if the question has a false

presupposition, then surely there is a distinction between what is being falsely presupposed and what is the case. Thus, it is not clear that Della Rocca can endorse the suggested reply. More generally, it appears that Della Rocca's view prevents him from drawing a distinction between what is false and what is true; it is thus—at least on its own terms—unfalsifiable. Whether this unfalsifiability is ultimately a virtue or a vice goes beyond the scope of this entry. What is undeniable is that Della Rocca has shown us the extraordinary power of a PSR-driven, Spinozistic line of argument. And as Della Rocca (2015, p. 533) himself writes, “Spinoza’s philosophy can help us to learn or re-learn how to do philosophy in a more productive vein.”

Fundamentality

Perhaps a central motivation for the widespread contemporary dismissal of the PSR is a commitment to fundamental entities. Many contemporary philosophers take there to be metaphysically fundamental entities (where “entity” is construed broadly so as to include facts, objects, properties, etc.). These metaphysically fundamental entities are explanatorily basic in the hierarchical structure of reality, and do important theoretical works. On some views, for example, they are taken to fix a direction for explanation (i.e., fix whether explanation proceeds “upwards” or “downwards”) and determine facts about relative fundamentality (Wilson 2016). But on a prominent way of understanding metaphysical fundamentality, the fundamental entities are just the ungrounded or unexplained entities (cf. Schaffer (2009)). The contemporary PSR, however, is the thesis that everything has a metaphysical explanation. Thus, at least on the face of it, no PSR proponent can accept that there are fundamental entities. This would be a major cost, if true, since fundamental entities do important theoretical works within contemporary metaphysics.

Is there a way to consistently endorse both the PSR and the existence of some fundamental entities? Amijee (2017) develops one way. Call *relativist* a conception of fundamentality on which whether an entity (object, property, or fact) is fundamental is relative to a metaphysical mode

of explanation, where metaphysical modes of explanation are individuated by which metaphysical dependence relations they involve. By contrast, call *absolutist* a conception of metaphysical fundamentality on which whether an entity is fundamental is not relative to a metaphysical mode of explanation. Most extant views about the metaphysically fundamental presuppose the absolutist conception. Yet on this conception, a commitment to the existence of fundamental entities that are unexplained precludes a commitment to the PSR. By contrast, on the relativist conception, an entity may be unexplained, and thus fundamental, relative to one metaphysical mode of explanation, and yet remain explained relative to another metaphysical mode of explanation. If the PSR requires only that every entity be such that it is explained relative to some metaphysical mode of explanation, a relativist conception permits us to endorse both the PSR and fundamental entities. Amijee (2017) argues on independent grounds against an absolutist conception of fundamentality, and in favor of a relativist conception.

A central goal of this entry has been to highlight the nature of the early modern rationalist commitment to the PSR, and to bring out the extent to which contemporary treatments of the PSR owe a substantial debt to this history. Readers will hopefully have gained a sense not only of the PSR's influential history, but also its continued relevance as a fundamental metaphysical thesis.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Du Châtelet and Leibniz](#)
- ▶ [Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm](#)
- ▶ [Spinoza's Metaphysics](#)

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