

On an un-Leibnizian requisite

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An infamous argument of Leibniz's for the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) has the following as its second step:

(2) If the requisites of a thing have all been posited, then the thing is.¹

The infamy of the argument lies partly in the justification Leibniz offers for this step, namely (p. 221):

For if it is not, it will be kept from being by the lack of something, that is, a requisite.

One might think, *pace* Leibniz, that a thing could in principle have all its requisites posited and yet fail to exist, not because it is “kept from being” by the lack of a requisite; but rather its non-existence could be a **brute**—i.e., unexplained or unexplainable—fact. Since the PSR implies that there are no brute facts, Leibniz's justification may appear to have already subscribed to something like the PSR.² This is perhaps the first reaction to Leibniz's attempt at

1 Quoted from Michael Della Rocca, “A new defense of the principle of sufficient reason”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 120 (2023): 220-227, at p. 221. Parenthetical page-number references are to this paper.

Leibniz defines a **requisite** of a thing as “that which is such that if it is not posited then the thing is not” (*ibid.*).

2 What Leibniz aims to prove in the *Proposition* presented in Della Rocca's paper (p. 220) is “*Nothing is without a reason, or whatever is has a sufficient reason*”—to wit, the task Leibniz sets for himself is proving the positive side of a metaphysical version of the PSR. Given that this positive side is silent about things which do not exist, and given that Leibniz's justification for (2) is concerned with a hypothetical non-existent thing, it is not

justifying (2), though we will see that the objection may be put in a shorter and stronger way, probably strong enough to hold its ground despite Della Rocca's persual.

Della Rocca's project is to revivify this step of Leibniz's argument for the PSR and thereby offering a new defence of this principle. He considers a "potential requisite of x 's existence", where the exact meaning of a **requisite of x 's existence** (or, more briefly, a **requisite of x**) is deliberately left open: it may either mean a necessary condition for the existence of x or something ontologically prior to x .³

Here is Della Rocca's suggested requisite of x , with my labelling (p. 222):

(R _{x}) x does not brutally fail to exist.

As the adverb 'brutely' may sound a bit odd in describing what a non-existent object may not do, specification might be in order. This is how I shall understand R _{x} : *if x fails to exist, then its non-existence is not a brute fact*.⁴

Della Rocca argues that enriching the class of requisites of x by means of adding R _{x} would justify (2). Suppose, for the sake of argument, that R _{x} is a requisite of x . How does it follow

crystal clear whether Leibniz is, strictly speaking, begging any question here. Therefore, although I find Leibniz's justification problematic and unsatisfactory, I do not think that the problem is that he literally commits *petito principii*. However that may be, I do not aim at criticising Leibniz: in this note I will focus on Della Rocca's proposed remedy, somehow independently of the true nature of the defect in Leibniz's argument. It is fortunate that, when introducing Leibniz's justification for (2), Della Rocca once writes that it presupposes "something *like* the PSR" (p. 222, my emphasis).

3 This is a wise choice: as Della Rocca observes, his argument is not sensitive to the choice between the two senses. But of course he finds the necessary-condition sense "problematically weak" (p. 222).

4 I do not find it likely that any single *material* conditional—as opposed to a combination of material and subjunctive ones—can capture the full sense of ontological priority of requisites preferred by Della Rocca (see my previous footnote); but that is not my concern here.

that, as asserted by (2), the obtainance of all the requisites of x entails the existence of x ? Here is Della Rocca (pp. 224*f*, with 'R1' of the original replaced by my 'R _{x} ')

To begin to see why including R _{x} as a requisite provides a non-question begging argument for (2), let us take all the other (perhaps infinitely many other) requisites for x 's existence. If all these other requisites are given and x still does not exist, then x 's non-existence would be a brute fact. [...] If all the requisites beside R _{x} obtain, and yet x does not exist, then x 's non-existence would seem to be unexplained.

I will shortly return to this part of the argument; for the nonce, let us see what comes next. Recall that R _{x} says that if x does not exist then its non-existence is not a brute fact. Della Rocca properly infers that if R _{x} is amongst the requisites of x , then x cannot fail to exist if *all* its requisites are obtained. Hence (2).

To make my criticism go more smoothly, I call any requisite of x except for R _{x} a **Leibnizian** requisite of x . The passage I displayed above says that if all the Leibnizian requisites of x obtain but x does not exist, then the non-existence of x is unexplained. Della Rocca's argument thus seems to have the following premise for each non-existent x :

(E _{x}) The non-existence of x is unexplained if every Leibnizian requisite of x obtains.

In other words, Della Rocca seems to assume that if the non-existence of x is explained then some Leibnizian requisites of x are not posited.

What is Della Rocca's justification for E _{x} ? Does he need one? We have textual evidence—though perhaps of a rather elusive type—that Della Rocca might have intended his argument to be a dialectical one, taking E _{x} from what Leibniz's opponent might have said in response to

Leibniz's justification for (2). The relevant piece of evidence is a sentence I replaced with ellipsis in the long quotation above, viz. "This is the kind of claim mentioned above that is made by the opponent of Leibniz's argument for (2)". Recall that Leibniz had claimed that the non-existence of a non-existent x is due to the lack of a requisite, and we had an objection which we may now present in a slightly more sophisticated form:

(O1) The following state of affair seems to be possible: *all the Leibnizian requisites of x are posited but x does not exist, and brutally so*. Leibniz should reject this *prima facie* possibility.

Now perhaps, in a dialectical move, Della Rocca takes E_x from O1 and applies it against Leibniz's opponent. Seen this way, Della Rocca need not justify his premise E_x .

This is an ingenious move to make; yet I have misgivings about this way of reading Della Rocca. First, on the whole, Della Rocca's elegant paper seems to aim at a *bona fide* defence of the PSR, not merely defending it in the weak sense of defusing a criticism of an argument for that principle. Thus when I read in his very first paragraph that Leibniz's argument for the PSR "can be made to work", and that "a non-question-begging and powerful justification—not envisaged by Leibniz—of that premise [i.e., (2)] is available" (p. 220), I come to believe that the undertaking of the paper is more ambitious than offering a dialectical refutation of an opponent.

Second, and more importantly, I think Leibniz's opponent can do better than offering O1 as an objection to Leibniz. He may say something like O2:

(O2) The following state of affairs seems to be possible: *all the Leibnizian requisites of x are posited but x does not exist*. Leibniz should reject this *prima facie* possibility.

I do not see why Leibniz's hypothetical opponent should have said anything whatsoever about any possibly brute fact. True, the opponent is against the PSR; but at this stage of the dialectic he does better by simply challenging (2) and remaining silent about the unexplainability of not-(2).

Now it may appear that it is no longer open to Della Rocca to simply and effortlessly take his crucial premise E_x from a more reasonable objection to (2)—that is, from O2. Yet this is not the end of the debate. Della Rocca may open up a dilemma for Leibniz's opponent, which goes like this. Let x be a non-existent object. Then either the non-existence of x is a brute fact, in which case E_x is trivially true (its contraposition holds vacuously), or else there is an explanation for this non-existence, and we may try to exploit such an explanation to extract a Leibnizian requisite of x which is not posited. Since such a move will get us to what I think is the heart of the matter concerning the validity of Della Rocca's argument, I prefer to leave the dialogue and talk about the prospects of directly justifying E_x .

Here is a thought for establishing E_x . Let x be a non-existent object and let Z be an actual explanation for its non-existence. Consider not- Z , which is not posited. Now the idea is that not- Z is a Leibnizian requisite of x : if not- Z is not posited, then x does not exist. Hence E_x holds for x .

I do not find this line of reasoning cogent, for it seems to me that it somehow equates explanations with sufficient reasons (an equation to which I shall briefly return). How else are we supposed to concede that if not- Z is not posited—if Z is posited—then x does not exist? Let me elaborate.

Leibniz defines a **sufficient reason** as "that which is such that if it is posited, then the thing is" (p. 221), and the proposition he tries to prove—the PSR—is that whatever exists has

a sufficient reason (p. 220). On this specific formulation,⁵ the PSR and its conceptual component of *sufficient reason* have a purely metaphysical flavour. Explanation, on the other hand, is of a different genre: it has something to do with knowledge and understanding, something essentially epistemic, an inherently human endeavour.⁶

Adducing a sufficient reason for the existence of an object is of course an explanation *par excellence* of its existence; yet, insofar as Leibniz's definition and this particular statement of the PSR are concerned, and in the absence of further argument, there being an explanation for the existence of x should not be thought of as equivalent to there being a sufficient reason for the existence of x —otherwise one would be uncritically subscribed to, broadly speaking, some sort of causal theory of explanation. An advocate of the PSR as such believes that there are no brute facts, because he believes that *nothing is without a sufficient reason*; logical space allows us, however, to deny the PSR while holding that there are no brute facts.⁷

If what I have said so far is correct, then the upshot is that Della Rocca's defence, as put in his paper, does not work. Yet I think we have not reached a dead end. Instead of R_x one may consider the following as a requisite of x :

5 Leibniz has formulated the PSR differently at numerous places, not all of them manifestly equivalent if equivalent at all. Although written by an authority on the seventeenth-century rationalism, I think of the paper I am replying to mainly as a *philosophical* paper; my concern is the particular text Della Rocca quotes in his paper and the defence he offers there, rather than any exegetical work on Leibniz on the PSR.

6 Thus concerning the "explanation" part of a family of philosophical topics (e.g., grounding) collectively known as **metaphysical explanation**, I think it is just a homonym unless we are somehow interested in an omniscient's viewpoint.

7 I am not sure if there actually is such a PSR-denier who holds that there are no unexplainable facts; but then I am just suggesting a conceptual room for such a position. (One candidate we may speculate about is some sort of radical Pythagorean philosopher who thinks that every fact has a complete *mathematical* explanation.)

(S_x) x does not fail to exist with no sufficient reason.

That is to say, if x does not exist then there is a sufficient reason for its non-existence.

Those who think that each explanation is a sufficient reason would probably regard S_x as extensionally equivalent to Della Rocca's R_x; they may make this move as an intensional fine-tuning just to defuse my criticism. As before, let us call any requisite of x except for S_x a

Leibnizian requisite of x .

We may imitate Della Rocca's original argument, this time to the effect that if all the Leibnizian requisites of x are posited but x does not exist then the non-existence of x will be without sufficient reason; add S_x, and you will have the existence of x if all the requisites of x are posited. This would have the following as a premise:

(F_x) The non-existence of x is without a sufficient reason if all Leibnizian requisite of x obtain.

Unlike before, however, here we are able to justify F_x. Let x be any non-existent object and suppose that there is a sufficient reason D for the non-existence of x . Then obviously not- D , which is not posited, is a requisite of x : if not- D is not posited—if, that is, D is posited—then x does not exist.

So I think here we have a valid argument in the spirit of Della Rocca's original argument for the PSR. Is this reformed argument convincing? The problem, in my view, is the very idea of thinking of S_x or its ancestor R_x as a requisite of x . What we see in Della Rocca's justification of R_x is mainly by way of clarifying its meaning, differentiating it from a similar candidate, elaborating on its negative nature, and commenting that taking it as a requisite will not

trivialize Leibniz's argument. Della Rocca is of course well aware that his defence "relies on considerations that Leibniz does not advance" (p. 220), and surely that is one point of strength in his approach. But the novelty here, I think, should be in analysis and argumentation, not introducing rather bizarre requisites. It seems to me that what underlies the attractiveness of Leibniz's argument for the PSR lies is the *Leibnizian* conception of requisite, whatever it is. I might be unable to say exactly what that conception, or family of conceptions, is; but, like the famous case of obscenity, I know it when I see it. If I am allowed to offer a rough—and perhaps unfair—analogy: the identity of indiscernibles is an extremely interesting thesis; yet the thesis will be robbed of its allure if we include haecceities as properties that the thesis is talking about.

Do we find R_x even of the right *kind* to be considered as a requisite of x ? What are some of typical things that have been considered as requisites? Perhaps divine attributes are requisites of creatures, perhaps absolute degrees of the attributes involved in the essence of an object are some of its requisites, perhaps the existence of the soul a human body belongs to is a requisite of that body—things like that.⁸ I think it is with *this* kind of requisites, not R_x - or S_x -kind of proposals, that we find Leibniz's argument for the PSR charming and worthy of extensive philosophical contemplation.

As for the reformed argument suggested above, I feel uneasy to be told that the negative side of the PSR—for that is what S_x is—may be included in the class of requisites of x , and I think we need to hear much more by way of justifying this inclusion. While I think we have, thanks to Della Rocca, a good argument for the PSR *given that S_x is a requisite of x* , I think the status of such a candidate for a requisite needs to be defended in more detail.

⁸ In preparing this very short list, I have consulted Robert Merrihew Adams's classic tome, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, Oxford University Press, 1994. If you want to make your own search, beware that what Della Rocca calls a 'requisite' is called a 'requirement' by Adams.

I conclude that, insightful as it is, Della Rocca's attempt to save (2) and defending the PSR is, as of yet, incomplete. Whether the PSR itself is true I do not know—though the empiricist inside me hopes not.