Is There Reason to Believe the Principle of Sufficient Reason?

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ABSTRACT: Shamik Dasgupta (2016) proposes to tame the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) to apply to only non-autonomous facts, which are facts that are apt for explanation. Call this strategy to tame the PSR the *taming strategy*. In a recent paper, Della Rocca (2020a) argues that proponents of the taming strategy, in attempting to formulate a restricted version of the PSR, nevertheless find themselves committed to endorsing a form of radical monism, which, in turn, leads right back to an untamed-PSR. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Della Rocca is right. My question is this: Is there reason to believe the principle of sufficient reason (in its untamed version)? In this paper, I argue that it is *impossible* for there to be a reason to believe the untamed-PSR.

§1 Introduction

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) says that everything has an explanation. But is there reason to believe the PSR? Parmenides, Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Spinoza, Bradley, and many others thought so.[1] However, the PSR is not without its dissenters. Notoriously, the PSR has often been thought to entail the existence of God, necessitarianism (the doctrine that all truths are necessary truths), the identity of indiscernibles (the view that two objects which have the same properties are identical) and the so-called principle of plenitude (the view that if an object can exist then it does exist).[2] It is no surprise, then, that many have been led to reject the PSR.

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[1] As cited in Della Rocca (2020a: 1103).
[2] As cited in Amijee (2020: 63).

Nevertheless, there is a project underway to revive a version of the PSR, one that avoids some of the aforementioned (negative) consequences. As Della Rocca (2020a) aptly points out, this project dates back to Kant's attempt to restrict the PSR to apply only *within* experience, rather than *outside* experience. This project of taming the PSR continues today most prominently with Shamik Dasgupta (2016), who proposes to tame the PSR to apply to only non-autonomous facts, which are facts that are apt for explanation. Contrary to Della Rocca's (2020a) construal of the PSR, Dasgupta leaves open the possibility that there is a plurality of facts that are metaphysically brute; that is, facts that explain their existence by their essence. Call this strategy to tame the PSR the *taming strategy.*

In a recent paper, Della Rocca (2020a) argues that proponents of the taming strategy, in attempting to formulate a restricted version of the PSR, nevertheless find themselves committed to endorsing a form of radical monism, which, in turn, leads right back to an untamed-PSR.[3] Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Della Rocca is right. My question is this: Is there reason to believe the principle of sufficient reason (in its untamed version)? In this paper, I argue that it is *impossible* for there to be a reason to believe the untamed-PSR. And this seems odd: for if there could be no reasons to believe the untamed-PSR, then why should you or I believe it? After all, even the weakest version of the PSR seems to dictate that it would be wrong to believe something without sufficient reason.

Here's the plan. In §§2-3, I briefly cover some of the motivations behind Dasgupta's (2016) taming strategy and examine Della Rocca's (2020) critique. In §4, I argue that it is *impossible* for there to be a reason to believe the untamed-PSR. In §5, I close by examining the prospects for vindicating the untamed-PSR via a non-relational showing.

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[3] Hereafter, I will refer to these two versions of the PSR as the "tamed-PSR" and the "untamed-PSR".

§2 Taming the PSR

The PSR-tamers, unlike the PSR deniers (e.g., David Hume, David Lewis, and Bertrand Russell), "feel the pull of the PSR" but they "urgently seek to limit it" (Della Rocca 2020a: 1103). Dasgupta (2016), proposes to tame the PSR to apply to only non-autonomous facts, which are facts that are apt for explanation. One motivation for this taming strategy is that it allows Dasgupta to populate his ontology with a collection of autonomous facts—those facts that are not apt for explanation (e.g., that 1+2=3 or that water is essentially H_2O). When the PSR-tamer is asked, for example, why water is essentially H_2O, they will say: "that is *just what water is!*" (Dasgupta 2016: 386). And for all questions of the form "Why is x φ?" the PSR-tamer will say that "It is essential to x that φ" (Dasgupta 2016: 386). After carving the totality of facts into autonomous and non-autonomous facts, Dasgupta arrives at his tamed-PSR:

> "PSR: For every substantive fact Y there are some facts, the Xs, such that (i) the Xs ground
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> Y and (ii) each one of the Xs is autonomous" (Dasgupta 2016: 390).

Whereas Kant attempted to restrict the PSR to experience to explain, amongst other things, our sense of ourselves as free beings, Dasgupta is willing to apply the PSR to everything—the only caveat, however, is that for Dasgupta, the scope of "everything" *just is* the total set of all autonomous facts. This allows Dasgupta to make room for an ontology which contains a plurality of fundamental facts, which explain the non-fundamental facts.[4] Aside from this motivation, Dasgupta also worries that the PSR (in its unrestricted version) is thought to imply "the existence of God [...] and indeed the existence

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[4] See Dasgupta (2016: 385). This makes room for priority monism. See Schaffer (2010) for a defence. Della Rocca (2020a) cites Schaffer (2010) as adopting a PSR-taming strategy to arrive at his priority monism.

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of every conceivable being" (Dasgupta 2016: 379).[5] Dasgupta, while friendly to the PSR, wants to avoid these doctrines. He argues that his tamed-PSR escapes these views.

We've glossed over many of the other motivations for trying to tame the PSR. But for the purposes of this paper, we only need to understand that some philosophers are in the business of taming the PSR. For recall, my question is not: does the taming strategy succeed? Rather, my question is this: Is there reason to believe in the untamed-PSR? Whatever the motivations one has for taming the PSR, then, are beside the point for this paper. In a way, I'm using these so-called tamers as a foil to explicate the context of Della Rocca's (2020a) argument that the tamed-PSR always leads back to the untamed-PSR. With my motivations on the table, let's now turn to Della Rocca's (2020a: §3) argument against the taming strategy.

§3 Undoing the Tamed PSR

Della Rocca's (2020a) first plan of attack on the PSR-tamer is to employ a modified Leibnizian argument for the PSR. After laying out his argument for the PSR, Della Rocca (2020a) goes on to argue that the PSR commits one to radical monism (RM), which says that there are no distinctions (i.e., no relations) in reality and that there exists only one thing. With the PSR in hand, Della Rocca (2020a) begins by asking us to consider why relations exist at all. If they do exist, then there must be a sufficient reason for their existence; and if there is a sufficient reason for their existence, then it must be intelligible. But Della Rocca claims that relations are not intelligible, and so they do not exist. Reconstructing Della Rocca's regress argument for RM yields the following:

1. Relations depend on their relata.

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2. The fact that (1) obtains cannot be explained by relations themselves, since relations are not free-floating (here the PSR is at work).

3. For any relation *R,* it is the case that *R* depends on its relata for its existence and an additional relation of "grounding that it stands in to one or more of its relata".

4. Let's call the relation of grounding in (3) R* (Della Rocca, 2020a: 1113).

(1) is a conceptual truth about what relations are. Consider the propositon "Spinoza loves his cat" (L<s,c>). If we change either of the relata, we change the relation (e.g., L<s,s> $=_{df}$ 'Spinoza loves himself'). (2) says that the dyadic relation—i.e., "loves"—cannot be explained by the relata themselves. This is because knowing that Spinoza and his cat exist doesn't tell us whether they love each other. By the PSR, (3) and (4) say that the relation L<s,c> must depend on an additional relation: R*. Thus, the answer to the question "What makes it the case that Spinoza loves his cat?" is itself another relation connected to L<s,c>, namely, R*. With (1)-(4) in place, Della Rocca (2020a: 1113) asks us to consider what R* depends on. We know from (1) that relations depend on their relata, so we might continue our reasoning as follows:

5. R* stands in a further grounding relation R**.

6. R** stands in a further grounding relation R***.

7. R*** stands in a further grounding relation R****.

8. And so on, ad infinitum (Della Rocca, 2020: 1113).

Reasoning from the PSR, we have arrived at an infinite regress which rules out the existence of relations, which is to say:

9. Nothing is what it is in virtue of some relation that it stands in.

10. The fact that (9) obtains, leads to radical monism (RM).[6]

This infinite regress has led many to a wholesale rejection of the PSR.[7] And yet, as Della Rocca (2020a: 1115) aptly points out, at no point does this regress argument apply the PSR to autonomous facts (it only applies to relations and their relata), which leaves Dasgupta (2016) without recourse. His only option, Della Rocca (2020a: 1116) claims, is to accept the RM that flows from the infinite regress argument; and RM leads right back to an untamed-PSR which applies to everything (not only the autonomous facts).

No doubt, Della Rocca's (2020a) argument rests on many contentious philosophical claims. But let's bracket these concerns for the moment and grant Della Rocca (2020a) his argument against the taming strategy. That is, let's suppose that any attempt to tame the PSR always leads back to RM, which, in turn, always leads back to an untamed-PSR.[8] Recall that my thesis for this paper is of a conditional form. I'm interested in the truth of the following claim: *if* Della Rocca is right, *then* there could be no reason to believe the principle of sufficient reason as he understands it.

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[6] RM says that the world contains no properties, relations, and distinctions, i.e., claims of the following form: (i) The cat is black ('C is B'); (ii) The cat loves Spinoza ('L<c,s>'); (iii) Spinoza is thinking of his cat ('T<s,c>').

[7] Most prominently, Russell (1910: 374) as cited in Della Rocca (2020a). Della Rocca notes that the infinite regress is also vicious. He writes: "Grounding R depends on first grounding R* which depends on first grounding R**, etc. This chain of grounds not only can never be completed, but it can never even get started: the chain of grounds can never, as it were, get off the ground" (Della Rocca 2020a: 1113). Of course, as Della Rocca notes, there is still the infinitist strategy of saying "that there are infinitely many relations of grounding—R*, R**, R***, etc.—but to deny that this regress is vicious" (Della Rocca 2020a: 1114). But Della Rocca's worry with this infinitist strategy is that it requires making a distinction between the relata (A and B) and the grounding relation (R*); such a distinction, Della Rocca claims, seems to arbitrarily violate the PSR. It is a violation of the PSR, Della Rocca claims, because while it grants that A and B are built into the nature of R, it denies that the further grounding relation R* is fundamental to R. This seems strange, for relations, as we know, are not free-floating entities. So, then, what licenses such an arbitrary distinction? Della Rocca's answer: the positing of a brute fact. Now, perhaps this is an option worth considering (for the PSR-denier). Yet, as Della Rocca claims, it does not seem open the PSR-tamer (Della Rocca 2020a: 1114). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to highlight this crucial step of Della Rocca's (2020a) argument.

[8] I should note here that Della Rocca (2020a) does not present an argument *directly* for the untamed-PSR in his paper. Rather, the dialectical strategy seems to be one of pushing PSR-tamers toward accepting the more radical untamed-PSR. Of course, there is still Russell's (1910: 374) road to take; that is, if presented with a choice between the untamed-PSR and the wholesale rejection of it, one might prefer the latter. Nevertheless, Della Rocca's (2020a) argument still does shift the dialectical burden, for if Della Rocca (2020a) is right, then there is no longer any middle-ground position with respect to the PSR. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this point to me.

§4 There are no reasons to believe Della Rocca's untamed-PSR

Before we get to my argument, let's start with three (very general) conceptual facts about what it is to be a reason. First, a reason is a "counting in favour of" relation.[9] For example, the fact that 1+1=2 gives you a reason to believe that 1+1=2; the fact that Spinoza's cat is lovable, gives him a reason to love it; and the fact that it is Mother's Day, gives you a reason to call your mother. Reasons, to put it somewhat awkwardly, give us reasons. Secondly, notice that "reason" is a two-place predicate; whenever there is a reason, there is (i) the thing that is the reason, and (ii) the agent for whom it is a reason.[10] For example, if you have a reason to believe that the PSR is true, then there is a counting in favour of relation between you and the proposition "Everything has an explanation." There are many ways to cash this out. For instance, you might say that you have evidence which counts in favour of the PSR; or you might say that the evidence you do have for the PSR is greater than the evidence that you have for the negation of the PSR; or you might simply say that the PSR strikes you as intuitively true. Thirdly, it follows from these truisms that reasons, like beliefs, require bearers: just as beliefs require believers, so too do reasons require (i) the thing that is the reason, and (ii) the agent for whom it is a reason. So, for example, if there is a reason to believe the PSR, then there must be (i) the thing that is the reason, and (ii) the agent for whom it is a reason (which is to say that if there are no agents, then there can be no reasons). With this in place, let's now turn to my argument.

1. Suppose S knows that the untamed-PSR is true.
2. If S knows that the untamed-PSR is true, then S knows that there are no distinct individuals (since the untamed-PSR entails Della Rocca's Radial Monism).

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[9] Here I follow Scanlon (2014: ch. 1-2).
[10] I borrow this definition from Schroeder (2007: ch.1).

The first premise of my argument supposes that Della Rocca's (2020a) untamed-PSR is true. I simply ask you—the reader—to grant that it is true. (2) says that if you know (1), then you know that RM is true. But according to RM, there exists only one thing and there are no relations, and consequently, there are no distinct individuals (since *distinction* is something that implies uniqueness amongst a set of objects). Let's continue onwards.

3. If there are no distinct individuals, then there are no PSR-affirmers.
4. But S's knowing that the untamed-PSR is true entails that there is an agent who knows this fact.
5. So, there is a PSR-affirmer.

(3) follows trivially from what we said about the nature of reasons. For in order for you to affirm that, say, you have a reason to believe the PSR, there must exist relata (i.e., you and the reason). But (3) is in direct contradiction with (4), which says that you *do* know that the untamed-PSR is true (via 1). And if you know that the untamed-PSR is true, then there must exist at least one PSR-affirmer. Let's continue onwards again.

6. And if there is a PSR-affirmer, then Radical Monism (RM) is false.
7. But if RM is false, then Della Rocca's (2020a) argument against the tamed-PSR fails.
8. Therefore, there could be no reason to believe the untamed-PSR.

The antecedent of (6) follows trivially from the fact that you—our supposed PSR-affirmer—exist. What else follows from the fact that you exist? Many things. But most importantly, it follows that we have just found one entity—you—that is composed of relations and their relata, which makes RM false. And if RM is false, then Della Rocca's (2020a) argument against the tamed-PSR fails, which gives rise to (8): there could be no reason to believe the untamed-PSR. In a way, (8) follows from the simple

fact that reasons require relations. If you have a reason to believe the untamed-PSR, then you also know that you don't exist; and if you know that you don't exist, then you can't have a reason to believe the untamed-PSR.

I've presented my argument here in a longer (and somewhat performative) form to engage with Della Rocca (2020). But notice that we can push back against Della Rocca's (2020a) argument in simpler terms. Here's his argument in brief:

1. The tamed-PSR entails RM.

2. RM entails an untamed-PSR.

3. Therefore, the taming strategy fails.

Now, ask yourself: How does the conclusion follow from the premises? Well, there must be a logical *relation* between the premises and the conclusion. But RM rules this out, and so (3) doesn't follow. Let's ask a simpler question: How does the untamed-PSR follow from RM? For one thing to "follow from" another implies a relation. But again, RM rules this out, so not even an untamed-PSR follows from RM. What, then, can we say follows from RM? Nothing. This is because "following from" and "entailment" are relational properties. In fact, if we banish relations from our vocabulary, then we can't assert anything. This should strike even the most modest defenders of the PSR as absurd. Surely, you might think, if there is sufficient reason for anything, there must be sufficient reason to believe the PSR. But Della Rocca's (2020a) untamed-PSR rules this out. And so, I conclude that it is *impossible* for there to be a reason to believe the untamed-PSR.

§5 Grasping the PSR

Near the end of his paper, Della Rocca (2020a) acknowledges my criticism that his construal of the PSR rules out the existence of creatures like you and I who can affirm that the PSR is true. There is,

in other words, a problem of coming to know how we could *grasp* the untamed-PSR.[11] Thus, Della Rocca writes:

> [T]he likes of me should avoid even *articulating* the view that the unrestricted PSR is true or that there are no relations. The most that the likes of me can do is not to *say* or *articulate* that the PSR is true unrestrictedly and that RM is true; instead, perhaps the best that can be hoped for is somehow to *gesture at* such a view, to *display*, or to *manifest* or to *show* (*zeigen*) it. Perhaps only in such a way can the PSR-affirmers or the likes of me stay true to the PSR (and to monism), only thus can we avoid the incoherence and the contradictions that beset PSR-tamers, and only thus can we see the world aright. Of course, this gesturing, this showing must somehow be non-relational, and exactly how to achieve this non-relational showing is far from obvious.[12] [...] If RM and the PSR in unrestricted form are true, then those who, like me, seem to affirm the PSR in unrestricted form are, despite being, in a way, right, are also, in a way, non-existent after all (Della Rocca, 2020a: 1117-1118).[13]

Here, Della Rocca appears to have opened a gap long favoured by mystics of all stripes: the gap between reason and understanding. This gap naturally gives rise to the view that there are ineffable truths—things that can only be *displayed*, *manifested*, or *shown* (*zeigen*), as opposed to grasped clearly and distinctly by reason. Della Rocca's usage of the word "zeigen" echoes what Wittgenstein (1922) wrote in the *Tractatus* nearly a century ago.[14] Wittgenstein writes:

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[11] Cf. with the similar Benacerraf/Field worries over how we could come to "grasp" and come to know necessary truths. (Benacerraf 1973; Clarke-Doane 2016).

[12] Della Rocca explores this theme in Della Rocca (2020b: ch.9).

[13] Della Rocca's (2020a) emphasis.

[14] It is also telling that chapter 12 of *The Parmenidean Ascent* is titled "Tractatus-Parmenideo-Philosophicus" (Della Rocca 2020b). A close reading of that chapter further elucidates the similarities between it and the last sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. See also Wittgenstein's 1930 lecture notes from Cambridge for parallel thoughts in ethical and religious domains (Wittgenstein 1930/1965: 11). And finally, see McGuinness (1966) for a discussion of mysticism in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, esp. page 326 for a discussion on Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics".

"Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische" (6.522).[15]

"There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical" (6.522).

The parallels between Della Rocca and the early Wittgenstein are striking. Both aim to vindicate "non-relational showings" (zeigen). And both express a difficulty in articulating what this non-relational showing consists of.[16] The comparison becomes even more striking when we juxtapose the last sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* with the last sentence of Della Rocca's *The Parmenidean Ascent.*

"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (7).

"I have often thought it ironic that the writings of Parmenides—one of the most famous monists in the history of philosophy—are available to us only in the form of" (Della Rocca 2020b: ch. 13).

In the penultimate proposition, Wittgenstein employs spatial and ocular metaphors of "climbing through" the propositions only to "throw away the ladder". And it is only after we have thrown away the ladder, we are told, that we can "see the world rightly" (Wittgenstein 1922: 6.54). Similarly, Della Rocca's (2020b) *The Parmenidean Ascent* ends with an incomplete sentence, occupying only a tenth of the blank page, as if it were a fragmented poem of some sort. But it is not a poem. It is a self-contained whole, the final thought in the last chapter of *The Parmenidean Ascent.* And the nearly blank page suggests—dare I say "shows" (*zeigt*)—what the final proposition of the *Tractatus* tells us: the most important thesis of this book cannot be spoken.

For the reader who takes this thought seriously, my argument that it is *impossible* for there to be reasons to believe the untamed-PSR might sound inefficacious. Instead of being in the business of

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[15] Here, Wittgenstein uses "zeigt", which is the third-person present singular of "zeigen".
[16] See Della Rocca (2020b: ch. 13).

giving reasons to believe the untamed-PSR, Della Rocca might instead opt for the job of "showing" us how his thesis—however unintuitive it might seem—could in fact be true. And yet, for the reader who takes my argument as a decisive knock-down against the untamed-PSR, there is also a methodological commitment lurking in the background, namely, that philosophy can only go so far in overturning common sense: it can never convince us of the possibility that we do not exist. Of course, for some this might seem like the most platitudinous of facts that we have to presuppose to get started in our inquiry. All well and good. I merely mention it to show that my argument against Della Rocca has not decisively *refuted* the untamed-PSR. I have only showed that it is impossible for there to be a reason to believe it. Perhaps the PSR-tamer or PSR-denier can be "shown" (zeigen) that it is true. But as Della Rocca himself writes, "how to achieve this non-relational showing is far from obvious" (Della Rocca, 2020a: 1117).[17]

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