

Sufficient Reason for the Principle of Sufficient Reason?

Karl Schafer (*Work in progress - do not cite without permission*)

The principle of sufficient reason (PSR) states that there is a reason for everything that is the case - or, alternatively, that, for everything that does exist, there is a reason for its existence. Obviously, the truth of some such principle would have a dramatic impact on our understanding of the nature of reality - for it pushes us towards a sort of monism which rules out standard non-reductive theories of morality, modality, and the like. As such, given the recent upsurge in interest in metaphysical monism of various sorts, the time seems right for a similar resurgence of interest in the PSR itself.¹ But does the PSR have independent plausibility? Or does whatever appeal it has derive entirely from the appeal of some independently attractive form of monism?

I suspect that most contemporary philosophers, if they have any attraction to the PSR, will be attracted to it for the latter sort of reason. But of course in the past things were quite otherwise - for many of the great philosophers of the past took the PSR to be one of the few pieces of philosophical bedrock available to the metaphysician. So it is natural to ask whether there is anything to be said of the PSR, conceived of as a starting place for metaphysical reflection. Or was its widespread acceptance as such simply the product of a broadly theistic perspective on philosophy of the sort that many philosophers today are skeptical of?

In a recent paper, Michael Della Rocca takes up just this noble, but unenviable task. That is, he offers a defense of PSR that does not rest on any further substantive metaphysical commitments.² If Della Rocca's argument is successful, then, the great philosophers of the past were correct - the PSR is available to metaphysicians as a starting point for metaphysical reflection. And yet, I am skeptical that Della Rocca's argument for this principle is successful as it stands. Thus, if this principle is to be defended, it will have to be on grounds other than those he offers.

In its essentials, Della Rocca's argument for the PSR rests on the Leibnizian observation that we appear to appeal to something very like the PSR in countless pieces of ordinary reasoning. Thus, drawing on these patterns of reasoning, Della Rocca hopes to uncover an implicit commitment to the PSR supporting reasoning that even the most empirically minded philosopher would find utterly unobjectionable.

Della Rocca hopes to locate this implicit commitment to the PSR by focusing on what

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²"PSR." *Philosopher's Imprint*, vol. 10, no. 7, July 2010. For two other notable exceptions see Alexander Prauss' *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Gordon Belot's "The Principle of Sufficient Reason." *Journal of Philosophy*, 97 (2001): 5574.

he calls “inexplicability arguments” - that is, arguments where we appear to reject an account of some phenomenon because that account would make this or that feature of that phenomenon inexplicable. Something like this pattern of argument is, of course, familiar from many recent philosophical debates - including debates about consciousness, personal identity, modality, meta-ethics, and so on. But, as Della Rocca - once again channeling Leibniz - stresses, something like this pattern of reasoning is present in almost all of our ordinary empirical theorizing as well.

I agree with Della Rocca that there is little room for serious doubt about the place of these sorts of arguments within our epistemic lives. So I will not take issue with his claims about this matter. The important question, to my mind, is not whether we make arguments of this general sort. Rather, it concerns the exact form of these arguments and, in particular, whether it involves the implicit commitment to the PSR that Della Rocca takes it to.

As Della Rocca describes them in his paper, inexplicability arguments have the following structure (using here the debate over the reduction of modality as our example):

1. If modality is not reduced in some way, then it will be inexplicable.
2. But modality is not inexplicable.
3. So modality must be reduced in some way.

If we understand inexplicability arguments in this way, it is easy to see why they might be thought to involve an implicit commitment to the PSR. After all, when making an argument of this sort, we seem to be taking the inexplicability of some phenomenon, given some theory, to be decisive evidence that this theory is false. And so, if we simply apply this pattern of reasoning with full generality, we will arrive at the conclusion that every theory according to which *anything* is inexplicable is false. And, of course, if every such theory is false, then the PSR is true.

In order to block this line of thought, Della Rocca suggests, the opponent of the PSR must find a way of drawing a non-arbitrary line between the ordinary cases in which he accepts the validity of an inexplicability argument and the cases, like the application of this argument to the PSR itself, in which he does not. And, Della Rocca suggests, the PSR’s opponent is a poor position to draw any such line in a principled fashion.

This argument for the PSR, though, rests on the characterization we have just given of the structure of inexplicability arguments. And there are good reasons, especially for someone of an empiricist bent, to wonder whether this is really the best way to understand what is involved in ordinary arguments of this sort. After all, if one is skeptical about the PSR, it is strange to *ever* take the inexplicability of some phenomenon, given some theory,

to be *decisive* evidence that this theory is false. Fortunately for the opponent of the PSR, we do not need to interpret ordinary inexplicability arguments in this way to make good sense of them. For we can instead understand these arguments to be based on the idea that the inexplicability of a phenomenon, on some theory, is a very significant cost of accepting that theory - but a cost that is not in every instance a decisive one.

If we conceive of the role of inexplicability in this way, we will reject the above characterization of the form of inexplicability arguments in favor of something like the following:

1. If modality is not reduced in some way, then it will be inexplicable.
2. All other things being equal, a theory which makes modality explicable is greatly to be preferred to a theory that does not.
3. All other things being equal, a theory that reduces modality in some way is greatly to be preferred to a theory that does not.

Now, obviously, this argument offers some support to the project of reducing modality. But this support need not be decisive - rather this will depend on the other costs and benefits of any such reduction. Thus, on this reading, no inexplicability argument is capable *on its own* of establishing the falsity of a theory. At the most such an argument show that a certain theory has certain costs attached to it - in particular, the cost of leaving this or that feature of reality unexplained. But no inexplicability argument can tell us (on its own) whether this cost is worse than the costs of the available alternatives. To decide this issue, we need to look beyond the inexplicability argument itself to a “cost-benefit” comparison of the various alternative views.

If we conceive of inexplicability arguments in this way, the opponent of the PSR has no need of drawing a principled line between valid and invalid inexplicability arguments in the manner that Della Rocca suggests he must. For he can insist that no such argument is capable of establishing its conclusion on its own. Rather, such arguments can only establish their conclusions in the context of a full examination of all of the features of the various competing views. So to determine whether such arguments provide us with sufficient reason to accept the PSR, we need to consider all of the other costs and benefits of doing so. And consideration of the nature inexplicability arguments on their own cannot settle *this* issue.

Now, one might protest at this stage that there are clear cases in which we appeal to inexplicability arguments that cannot be accurately characterized in this manner just suggested. So, Della Rocca might insist, even if some inexplicability arguments have the second, weaker form, this simply isn't plausible for all such arguments. But it seems reasonable for the opponent of the PSR to resist this response. For he can easily explain the existence of cases in which we *seem* to be making inexplicability arguments in Della

Rocca's stronger sense. After all, there are many cases in which we know that there are reasonably attractive ways of making some phenomenon explicable. And in these cases, we can expand the second, weaker sort of inexplicability argument in the following way:

1. If modality is not reduced in some way, then it will be inexplicable.
2. All other things being equal, a theory which makes modality explicable is greatly to be preferred to a theory that does not.
3. All other things being equal, a theory that reduces modality in some way is greatly to be preferred to a theory that does not.
4. There are theories that reduce modality without thereby generating unacceptable costs.
5. Therefore, there are theories that reduce modality and which are greatly to be preferred to any theory that does not.
6. Therefore, modality must be reduced in some way.

When expanded in this way, even the weaker form of inexplicability arguments can generate conclusive results. Thus, the opponent of the PSR can maintain that whenever it seems to us that we are relying on the first, stronger sort of inexplicability argument, what we are really relying on is the expanded version of the second, weaker one.

To be clear, none of this shows that PSR is false. Nor does it show that the sorts of considerations that Della Rocca notes do not offer *some* support for the PSR. On the contrary, even if we understand inexplicability arguments in the manner I have been suggesting, the inexplicability argument that Della Rocca gives does offer significant support for the PSR. But it does so, on this way of understanding such arguments, by showing us a significant cost of any view that rejects the PSR - namely, that any such view will leave less explained than alternatives that accept the PSR. This fact, and here I agree with Della Rocca, is something that all of us, simply by engaging in inexplicability arguments, are committed to taking to support the PSR. But whether this support is sufficient to establish the truth of the PSR requires careful consideration of the other costs of its acceptance. And it would be a mistake to take the fact that the PSR is supported, to some degree, by an inexplicability argument to show that these costs should not be taken seriously. For to do so would be to interpret the force of inexplicability arguments as more decisive than it truly is.³

³In particular, it would be a mistake for the defender of the PSR to take his arguments for it to show that these costs are not theoretical costs at all. After all, a true theory may nonetheless be theoretically costly in quite significant ways. Thus, even if we could establish to our satisfaction that the PSR is true, this would not show that there are not real theoretical costs attached to its acceptance.