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## Adventures in Rationalism

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## **Adventures in Rationalism**

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I would like to take this occasion to advance and defend, relatively informally, what many would think – and indeed what most philosophers would think – is a crazy, hopeless view. And, perhaps it is crazy, but I don't really care if it's thought to be crazy because I'm a throwback, a throwback to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and also a throwback to the pre-Socratic period, to the time of Parmenides. In other words, I am a shameless rationalist. The claim I want to defend can be seen as the cornerstone of rationalism. Further, I venture to say that this claim is – implicitly – in many ways also the cornerstone of all philosophy.

### **I. Varieties of Rationalism.**

But before introducing the specific proposition I want to defend, let's focus on the general thesis – or theses – of rationalism – a venerable movement in philosophy, now treated occasionally with respect but only when philosophers are not busy studiously ignoring this relic from philosophy's overly ambitious past.

Rationalism can be many things to many people, and historically philosophers who espouse rationalism in one sense of the term, also are sympathetic to rationalism in other senses. Often rationalism is regarded as the view that we have so-called innate ideas, ideas that are implanted innately in the mind, ideas that perhaps give us a priori access to truths about the world and about the nature of modality, about fundamental logical and moral properties, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The term “rationalism” can also indicate some kind of privileging of modes of cognition that are somehow independent of sense experience, a privileging of

so-called a priori modes of cognition over sensory cognition. On this view, the senses are a less reliable means of getting to know truths about the world than are non-sensory means or the operations of reason. Descartes is often seen as an example of a rationalist of this variety. And, no wonder: he says in his *Second Meditation*, for example, that both the nature and the existence of bodies are better known through the intellect than through the senses. Plato with his frequent derogation of the senses is also a rationalist in this sense.

These are fine characterizations of rationalism, but I am more interested in a related and, I believe, more fundamental form of rationalism. This form is the commitment to the intelligibility of the world and of all the things in the world. On this view, the world and the things in the world are through and through intelligible. Nothing happens for no reason. On the contrary, whatever takes place, whatever exists, takes place or exists for a reason. Everything. On this view there are no brute facts. Each thing that exists has a reason that is sufficient for explaining the existence of the thing.<sup>2</sup> According to perhaps the most extreme implication of this view, even the world itself, the totality of all that exists, exists for a reason, has an explanation.

And here we arrive at the claim that will be the focus of this paper, for according to this strand of rationalism, rationalism is committed to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the PSR, the principle that each thing that exists has an explanation, a sufficient reason. Some philosophers adhere not only to this positive version of the PSR, but also to what can be seen as the flip-side or negative version of the PSR. The positive version of the PSR is roughly the claim that for each thing that exists, there is an explanation for the fact that it exists. The negative, flip-side version is the claim that if a thing does not exist, there must be an explanation for the fact that it does not exist. Spinoza, for example, endorses the PSR in its positive and negative versions: "For each thing, there must be assigned a cause or reason both for its existence and for its non-existence."<sup>3</sup> This is not primarily an historical essay, but I would be remiss if I didn't point out that the PSR is most famously associated with Leibniz who speaks of:

[The principle] of sufficient reason by virtue of which we consider that there can be no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason for why it is thus and not otherwise, although most of the time these reasons cannot be known to us” (*Monadology* §32).<sup>4</sup>

The principle has appeared throughout the history of philosophy and has, arguably, been endorsed not only by Spinoza and Leibniz, but also by Parmenides, Aquinas, Descartes, Hegel, Bradley, and others. In fact, right up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century the PSR was extremely popular (though its implications weren't fully appreciated), but then something happened and, in a way, philosophy has yet to recover. I will return to this cataclysm that befell philosophy soon enough, but before I do so, I hope you can understand why, from one point of view, the PSR was so well-loved. Its popularity was due to its breathtaking commitment to the intelligibility of all things. If philosophy is – as I believe it is – the commitment to finding ourselves and our place in the world intelligible, if it is the commitment to making sense of ourselves and the world, then what better tool for philosophers to use than the PSR which is, after all, the embodiment of the commitment to finding the world intelligible?

## **II. First Application of the PSR: the Non-absoluteness of Space.**

Let me mention a few ways in which philosophers have invoked the PSR to try to establish bold claims. It's natural to turn again to Leibniz. One use to which he put the PSR was to reject the absoluteness of space. To say that space is absolute is to say that space is somehow metaphysically or explanatorily prior to the objects in space. (It's a question of what's more fundamental: space or the objects in space.) One can understand space as a container independent of the objects in space, as the absolutist about space

would hold. A relationalist about space would hold that facts about space depend on the objects in space and that we cannot make sense of space without appealing to objects located in space. Newton was famously an absolutist about space. Leibniz was a great relationalist about space.

Here's one of Leibniz's arguments against absoluteness in his correspondence in 1715 and 1716 with Samuel Clarke, a good philosopher in his own right and an ally of Newton. Keep in mind that at this point there was already bad blood between Newton and Leibniz (and their followers) concerning just who it was that discovered the calculus. Now they were, through one of Newton's surrogates, engaged in a separate debate about the nature of space. Let's say space is absolute. If so, then space is explanatorily prior to objects in space. If that's the case, then we can imagine God as confronted with a choice. First – and this is a metaphysical “first”, even if not a temporal “first” – space, the container is empty. If God wants to locate a physical object in space, he would have no reason to locate it in one place rather than five feet to the left. Or, God would have no reason to orient the object this way rather than that way. So if God does locate the object here rather than there, then God would be acting arbitrarily, without a sufficient reason. God's action would thus be a brute fact. But given the PSR there can be no brute facts. So there cannot be an absolute space, at least there cannot be an absolute space if there are indeed physical objects in the world.<sup>5</sup>

The argument mentions God, but really God is irrelevant to the argument. So, for the moment, forget about God and consider this argument: if space is a container and there's a physical object in space, then what reason is there for that object to be here rather than there? Given the homogeneity of space understood as a container, there could be no reason for the object's being located here rather than there. Thus there would be a brute fact if space is absolute and there are objects in space, but given the PSR there can be no brute facts, so there can be no objects in absolute space.

### **III. Second Application of the PSR: the Identity of Indiscernibles.**

Here's another use of the PSR: establishing the venerable Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles. You might think that there can be two things exactly alike, with all the same properties, two things that are (as Leibniz puts it) indiscernible. Imagine – and this certainly seems possible – that all there is in the universe are two perfect spheres, made of homogenous matter, with the same dimensions, five feet away from each other. But they are two. Let's name one "A" and the other "B". Each of the spheres has all the same properties or so it seems – each has the same dimensions, is made of homogenous matter, is five feet away from another sphere. The only thing that seems to differentiate the spheres is this: A is not B and B is not A. So why is A not identical to B? Answer: because A is not identical to B. This answer is correct as far as it goes, but this is hardly an illuminating explanation. Yet, under the circumstances, there seems to be no other way to explain the non-identity of A and B, so the non-identity of A and B must be a brute fact in such a situation.

You might think that the non-identity of the spheres can be illuminatingly explained by appealing to the different locations they occupy. But rather than solving the problem, this response merely postpones it, for now we are left to ask: what is it in virtue of which the first location is different from the second? And, again under the circumstances, there is no difference we can appeal to other than the non-identity of the locations themselves. Again, we arrive at a brute fact.

So, it might seem as if the non-identity of two exactly alike – indiscernible – objects would violate the PSR. The same result would hold for more complicated situations, situations involving richer universes with a great variety of objects. The only requirement for generating the problem is that these universes be symmetrical have two or more parts, as it were, each of which is a mirror image of the other.

But if one accepts the PSR and holds that there can be no brute facts, then such a universe is impossible. Indeed, more generally, given the PSR, there can be no *two* things exactly alike. If A and B are exactly alike, then A must be identical to B. This is the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles, and Leibniz explicitly grounds it in the PSR in precisely the way that I have done in the correspondence with Clarke and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, nowadays, the PII finds few adherents, in part because of the cataclysmic events of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to which I have already alluded. But for now let's continue to reminisce and look fondly back, as I do, on the time when the PSR was ascendant in philosophy.

#### **IV. Third Application of the PSR: the Cosmological Argument.**

An even more famous way of employing the PSR – to be found in Aquinas, Spinoza, Leibniz, and others – is to prove the existence of God.<sup>7</sup> This is the so-called cosmological argument for the existence of God. The aim of the argument is to show that, given the PSR and certain trivial assumptions, there must be a being that is self-explanatory, a being that is the ground of its own existence. From there, it will be a short step, so the argument goes, to show that this being is God.

To carry out this argument, let's assume that the PSR is true but that there is no God or self-explanatory being. Throw in the following trivial assumptions: something exists, e.g. me whom we shall unimaginatively call "A". Let's see how far we can get while avoiding the claim that there is a self-explanatory thing. So assume that this something, A, is not self-explanatory, is not the ground of its own existence. But since A is not self-explanatory then, given the PSR, it must be grounded in something else, B. Again, if we want to avoid the conclusion that there is a self-explanatory being, we must say that B is not self-explanatory. OK, so given the PSR, it's clear that we are off on an infinite regress. But this regress seems not to be problematic: we have an infinite series of dependent, non-self-

explanatory beings and no self-explanatory being, no being that is the ground of its own existence. This regress – though infinite – seems not to be at all vicious; there seems to be no explanatory question left unanswered.

But wait! There may be one more being that we must consider. This is not any member of the series of dependent beings, i.e. the series of beings that are dependent on other beings, but rather the series of all dependent beings itself. What is the explanation of the whole series? The PSR allows us to ask that question, and it demands an answer. So what is the reason for the existence of the whole series of dependent beings? This question is a form of the traditional question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Let’s say that a big bag – an infinite bag – is placed around the whole series of dependent beings – or that the series itself is a bag. Given the PSR, there must be a reason for the bag and this reason itself must be a being, a thing. Is the reason for the bag dependent on something else or is the reason for the bag itself self-explanatory? Well, it can’t be dependent on something else because the bag is the entire series of dependent beings. The bag contains all dependent beings, so if the reason for the bag itself is a dependent being, then the reason for the bag itself depends only on itself, and this would contradict the assumption that the reason is dependent on other beings. So the assumption that the reason for the bag is a dependent being leads to a contradiction. So the reason for the bag must be self-explanatory and thus this being must be independent.

Of course, we may be able to avoid this conclusion. I spoke glibly of the series, the infinite series, of dependent beings as a bag, as if the series were an object in its own right, but perhaps the collection of all dependent things is not itself a thing. And so, because the explanatory demand kicks in only when we have a thing, no explanation is required for the series of dependent beings. Perhaps this is so, but – one has to ask in the spirit of the PSR – in virtue of what would this series not count as a thing or object? Perhaps an answer could be developed, but the burden, I think is on those who claim that the series is not an object. At any rate, even if we grant that the series is not itself an object, we can still advance the rationalist argument by appealing to facts instead of things. If



we look at the series of dependent things, we can ask – as the PSR demands – what is the explanation of the fact that there is such a series. What explains the remarkable fact that there is – as one might put it – something rather than nothing? The explanation of this remarkable fact must appeal to some thing or fact other than the existence of dependent beings and, once again, it's hard to see how to avoid the path from the series of dependent things to the existence of an independent, self-explanatory being or to the fact that an independent being exists.

Leibniz and others go on to say that the independent being is God, but, for our purposes, we needn't follow the argument this far. For us, it is enough that the PSR helps us to reach the surprising conclusion that there must be a being that is the reason for its own existence.

#### **V. Fourth Application of the PSR: Monism.**

One of the most exotic apparent implications of the PSR is monism, indeed a rather strong version of monism. Roughly, monism in this form is the thesis that there is only one thing in the world, viz. the world itself, and all the distinctions among the things – the apparent things – we know and love, things like you and me and the chair and the dog and the rock and Taylor Swift – are somehow not real, somehow illusory.

Here's one quick way to reach this very controversial conclusion. The argument concerns the nature of relationality, what it is for two or more things to stand in a relation. Consider, for example, the relation of being five feet away from something. This relation may hold between two objects, say, between me and the door, or between objects A and B. Call this relation, R. It seems very natural to say that relations such as R must be grounded in or explained by some thing or things. Certainly the PSR would demand such an explanation: relations, like all other things, stand in need of explanation.

It also seems very natural to say that a relation is grounded in its relata, i.e. in the things, A and B, that stand in this relation. In the case at hand, the relation between A and B would somehow be grounded in, explained by, A and B. But exactly how is the relation grounded in A and B?

First, it seems wrong to say that R is grounded in A alone to the exclusion of B. The PSR can help us see why such one-sided grounding is illegitimate. To say that R is grounded in A alone seems unfair and arbitrary because B has an equal claim to be a ground of R. If A alone has the honor of grounding R, this would seem to be a fact that holds for no reason, a brute fact, and thus something that the PSR would not countenance. Similarly, the relation R cannot be grounded in B alone.

So perhaps the relation is grounded not in A alone or in B alone, but in A and B *together*. Fair enough, but this seems to introduce a new difficulty, one that is familiar from our discussion of the cosmological argument. We are trying to explain a relation R and to do so we need, it seems, to appeal to a further relation, to the fact that A and B *co-exist*, they are *together*.

But now what explains the co-existence of A and B, what explains the fact that this further relation holds between A and B? To explain the “togetherness” of A and B, the coexistence of A and B, we can’t appeal, it seems once again, to A alone or to B alone. Instead we must appeal to A and B together, i.e. to the fact that A and B co-exist and stand in a certain relation, and here we get into a circle: we’ve explained the coexistence of A and B, a certain relation between A and B, by appealing to that very relation. This is hardly an illuminating explanation. The PSR would demand a more robust explanation.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that R – a relation between A and B – cannot be legitimately grounded, cannot be legitimately explained. But the PSR, of course, demands such an explanation. What’s the result then? It can only be that the relation – apparently between A and B – is not genuine. A and B do not really stand in this relation R after all. This is shocking, and it’s even more shocking when we realize that R was just an example, just a stand-in for any relation. The general point is that all relations are not genuine, are in need of grounding or explanation

which they cannot obtain. In particular, the relation of distinctness between “two” objects, any relation of non-identity, is not legitimate because such relations of non-identity are, like any other relations, incapable of being grounded.

So, given the PSR, there can be no relations of non-identity, no relations of distinctness, and thus there can at most be only one thing. (I’ll return to this “at most” later.). Any multiplicity of things would bring with it relations – at least relations of distinctness – which are, as we’ve just seen illegitimate. So there can be no genuine multiplicity of things and thus there is at most only one thing. This is a version of monism and the argument I have just given is, in effect, the argument the British Idealist, F.H. Bradley, gave for monism in his great and almost unreadable book, *Appearance and Reality*. Arguably, Parmenides also accepts this form of monism (though he does not explicitly invoke relations).<sup>9</sup>

Let me say a bit about what this version of monism entails and does not entail. This version of monism entails that the only genuine thing is the world itself (if there is anything at all). But that’s not to say that the familiar objects we know and sometimes love are not real at all. It may be the case that we can find some kind of place for such ordinary objects in our ontology as long as we acknowledge that this multiplicity is not fully real, that because it is not fully intelligible it does not fully exist. But this multiplicity may be intelligible to some degree and exist to some degree. What the monistic point of view suggests is that the distinctions we may see or think we see among the thing we know are not fully real. What the monistic point of view also suggests is that all the reality that is legitimately contained in A and B and you and me is fully captured by the whole undifferentiated cosmos or world itself. When we take up this point of view – this point of view of reality as a whole – we do lose sight of the distinctions between things, but to lose sight of these distinctions is not to lose sight of something fully intelligible for distinctions, like all relations, are not genuine, they are not real. This monistic conclusion may seem to do damage to our sense of our individuality, but it does so only by telling us that whatever reality our individuality might be thought to have is captured better and more accurately by appealing to the one whole without any genuine differentiation in it.

## VI. The Cataclysm of Pure Reason.

The ethical implications of this monism are considerable and, for this reason, Spinoza called his major work, the *Ethics*. There are, e.g., implications for the way in which we should be concerned for the world itself as opposed to being concerned about ourselves, that is, as opposed to being concerned about how things look from our limited and inevitably distorting perspective. But I won't explore these ethical implications here. I have merely wanted to articulate the breath-taking heights to which the PSR might be thought to lead. These heights are, of course, nevertheless extremely counterintuitive. It's counterintuitive to embrace, as the proponent of the PSR should, the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles, the existence of a self-explanatory being, and some form of monism. In light of these implications of the PSR, it's no wonder that most philosophers nowadays simply reject the PSR if they bother to consider it at all.

Ironically, the aversion to the PSR, to the view that all is intelligible solidified around the time of the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, with such thinkers as Hume and Kant. Both of these great philosophers subject the PSR to withering attack and both make it their mission to limit the pretensions of the PSR.<sup>10</sup>

I cannot go into Hume's and Kant's reasons for rejecting the PSR here. But briefly I can say that Hume sees – perhaps more clear-headedly than almost any rationalist – how the PSR leads to extremely counterintuitive consequences, consequences that he sees as “hideous”. On this basis, he comes to reject the PSR. In particular, Hume sees that the PSR entails monism. He regards monism as obviously false, and so he rejects the PSR. This is a very simple and powerful argument against the PSR, one whose full significance has not yet, I believe, been fully appreciated.

Kant also clearly sees the power and the problems with the full-blown, unrestricted use of the PSR. He recognizes that unintelligibility and indeed contradictions may result from an unfettered PSR. And, perhaps unlike Hume, Kant seeks not to reject the PSR entirely but to clip its wings. For Kant, the best

way to do this – a way that simultaneously safeguards human knowledge and human freedom – is to limit the PSR to the explanation of matters in the realm of our experience and to deny that the PSR could lead to justified conclusions or knowledge about matters that transcend the evidence of our senses. And so, for this reason, Kant claimed that philosophy in the grip of the PSR is not able, as Leibniz and others hope, to prove the existence of God and that philosophy is not able to prove, as Spinoza claims, that the world is a unified, monistic whole.

After Hume's and Kant's criticisms, most philosophers agreed that the ambitions of pure reason must be limited in something like the way Kant suggests. And so, with Hume's and Kant's criticisms of the PSR, the PSR came to fall more or less into disrepute. These events were, as I like to think of them, the cataclysm of pure reason.

## **VII. Fifth Application of the PSR: Necessitarianism.**

But perhaps the most devastating argument against the PSR came much later – this argument solidified many of the intuitive reactions against the PSR from the very beginning and helped to make concrete Kant's concerns about how the PSR leads to the denial of human freedom. A standard worry about the PSR had been that the PSR, if true, would mean that all truths are necessary truths. If all truths are necessary truths, then it's hard to see how very many of our most fundamental beliefs can be true. We believe that I might have worn a blue shirt today instead of a white shirt, that Obama might have lost the 2012 election, etc. But if necessitarianism – the thesis that all truths are necessary truths – is true, then these "might have" claims cannot be correct. One thing that's wrong with necessitarianism is that it seems to conflict with our conviction that some of our actions can be free and can be actions for which should be held responsible and praised or blamed. And this is because praise and blame and responsibility and freedom seem to require alternative possibilities of action. But if there are no alternative possibilities, if things could not have been different in any respect – as

necessitarianism requires – then there seems to be no freedom, etc. and this is very upsetting.

What is the argument that the PSR leads to necessitarianism? Let's assume that the PSR is true but there are some contingent truths, some truths that are not necessary. Let's say that  $p$  is such a contingent truth. Given the PSR,  $p$  must have a reason. But since we are supposing that  $p$  is contingent and not necessary, the reason for  $p$  must be some proposition other than  $p$ . OK, let's say the reason is  $q$ . Let's assume, further, that since  $q$  is the reason for  $p$ ,  $q$  necessitates  $p$ . That is, in general the reason for a truth necessitates that truth. Some philosophers deny that reasons necessitate, but I am prepared to defend this claim, though I do not have the space to do so here. Now  $q$  which necessitates  $p$  is either necessary or contingent. If  $q$  is necessary then since  $q$  entails  $p$ ,  $p$  would, contrary to our assumption, be necessary, not contingent, after all. So the reason for  $p$ , viz.  $q$ , must be contingent as well. But what then is the reason for  $q$ ? Let's say that the reason is  $r$ . OK, but again we face the same issue: is  $r$  necessary or contingent? If it's necessary, then  $q$  which is entailed by  $r$  must be necessary after all and similarly  $p$  must be necessary. If  $r$  is contingent, then we must look to the reason for  $r$  and the regress of contingent truths continues.

So if we are to preserve genuine contingency along with the PSR, we must have an infinite series of contingent propositions. So far, so good. We don't yet have to say that the PSR entails that all truths are necessary.

But now step back and consider not  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$  taken by themselves, but rather the vast conjunction of all contingent truths. The conjunction includes  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$  and many more propositions. Let's call this big conjunction  $C$ . (This is like the bag of dependent beings we saw earlier.) Given the PSR,  $C$  must have a reason. Call this reason  $RC$ . If  $RC$  is necessary, then since  $RC$ , the reason for  $C$ , necessitates  $C$  and thus necessitates  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$ , etc., all those others propositions – as necessitated by a necessary proposition – would themselves be necessary. So there would be no contingent propositions after all, and all would be necessary. Thus if we are going to maintain genuine contingency, then we must

say that RC, the reason for the vast conjunctive proposition, must not be necessary. But if RC is not necessary, then it's contingent and so it's a component of the vast conjunctive proposition. In this case, RC – as the reason for the vast conjunctive proposition containing all contingent truths including RC itself – would be the reason for itself. But a proposition that explained itself could not fail to be true because it is not contingent on any other truths. Thus RC, if contingent, would be the reason for itself and would thus be necessary after all. So RC cannot be contingent because the assumption that it is leads to the conclusion that it is necessary. But, as we've seen, neither can RC be necessary. So RC can neither be necessary nor contingent. There can, then, be no true proposition RC. So there can after all be no reason for C. But this goes against the PSR. So given the PSR, we must give up the assumption that there is a conjunction of contingent truths and that there are contingent truths. All truths are necessary.<sup>11</sup>

Few people – if any – want to be this extreme and that's why people find it easier simply to deny the PSR and deny that all is intelligible than to embrace the claim that all truths are necessary. (This is what van Inwagen does.) Of course, to meekly accept that not everything is intelligible is really, I think, to give up the birthright of philosophers. But we find philosophers willing to do this time and time again.

## **IX. An Argument for the PSR.**

And that's how things stand. Until now. For I want to offer a kind of argument for the PSR. The argument is very simple, yet, I think, very powerful. The argument, like so much of philosophy, aims to put you in a difficult position: either you have to embrace the PSR (and necessitarianism, etc.) OR you have to give up some claims that all or most rational beings are loath to give up. Once we see the power of this argument for the PSR, there will be one final twist that puts everything in a very different light.

To begin the argument for the PSR, I say: forget about the PSR, and just focus on some intuitively very plausible and, indeed, wildly popular arguments. I call these arguments explicability arguments.<sup>12</sup>

I will offer a series of explicability arguments. The first argument is what may be called the Archimedes argument. Here we have the welcome opportunity to appeal once again to Leibniz's correspondence with Clarke where Leibniz says:

[Archimedes] takes it for granted that if there is a balance in which everything is alike on both sides, and if equal weights are hung on the two ends of that balance, the whole will be at rest. That is because no reason can be given why one side should weigh down rather than the other. (p. 321)

It seems plausible to say that in this situation, the whole balance will be at rest and to say this for precisely the reason that Leibniz indicates: if the beam should lean to one side or the other, there would be no reason for it to do so. This is an explicability argument for it claims, rather plausibly, that a certain state of affairs cannot obtain – the state of affairs in which the beam is not balanced – because that situation would bring with it a fact that is intolerably inexplicable. The rejection of inexplicability in this situation is not a commitment to the full-blown rejection of inexplicability, to the unrestricted PSR, but the plausibility of this particular explicability argument can lead us to ask: how far does this concern with avoiding inexplicability go?

So let's turn to another case: this is a case of fission. Here I turn to a famous example from Parfit.<sup>13</sup> A person's brain – it could be my brain, but to preserve anonymity let's call this person "A" – is cut in half and each of the halves is placed in a different and new body. Amazingly, due to an unexpected redundancy in brain function, the newly embodied half-brains result in persons in the different new bodies that are exactly like A both with regard to memory and character traits, etc. Let's call the two subsequent people, "B" and "C".



Is A identical to B or to C? A certainly cannot be identical to both B and C. After all, B and C are not, it seems, identical to each other, and thus, given the transitivity of identity, A cannot be identical with both B and C. Can we say then that A is identical to B in particular as opposed to being identical to C? It would seem that it would be arbitrary for A to be identical to B and not to C since C has as good a claim as B does to being identical to A. Any identity of A with B or with C seems objectionably arbitrary and so any such identity should be rejected. This is precisely the conclusion that Parfit draws.

The point here need not involve a science fiction example. We can reach a similar result by looking at real-life examples of fission involving amoebae. Thus David Wiggins says, “since neither [of the resulting amoebae in a case of fission] has a better claim than the other, no sensible theory will want to count either amoeba as identical with the original one”.<sup>14</sup>

Once we identify the phenomenon of explicability arguments, we can find them everywhere in philosophy and their pervasiveness only increases the pressure on us to address the question of whether explicability arguments in general are legitimate and whether one can, as it were, go all the way with explicability arguments and embrace the full-blown PSR.

A particularly instructive case of an explicability argument concerns the nature of causation. What is causation? It seems natural to demand an account, an explanation of what causation is. What is it in virtue of which one collection of events counts as a causal series and another collection does not? Many philosophers, such as Hume, hold that there must be an answer to this question - that it would be unacceptable for there to be nothing in virtue of which a collection of events counts as causal. In so demanding an explanation of what causation is, these philosophers are saying that a certain situation in which causation has, in effect, no nature is unacceptable because such a situation would make a given phenomenon – causation – unintelligible.

Similar demands for explanations of certain phenomena are made in the case of consciousness (“what is consciousness?”), necessity (“what is

necessity?”), moral goodness and rightness (“what are goodness and rightness?”), and many others.

Still, even if we accept these demands, there is no argument yet for the PSR itself – that is, until we turn to one final phenomenon, viz. existence itself. For we are naturally led to ask, just as we might demand an account, an explanation, of what causation is, what consciousness is, what necessity is, and just as we might advance all the other explicability arguments that I mentioned, so too we might demand an explanation of existence itself. Just as we might ask what is it in virtue of which a causal sequence is a causal sequence, so too we might ask what is it in virtue of which a thing that exists exists. What is existence, we might ask (that’s a paradigmatic philosophical question), just as we might ask what is causation, what is consciousness, what is goodness, etc. In asking these questions and demanding answers, we are appealing to explicability arguments. So, given the other cases of explicability arguments that we accept, there is pressure on us to accept the explicability argument in the case of existence. Indeed, the pressure amounts to an argument for accepting the demand for explicability in the case of existence. If we are going to resist this pressure – resist this argument for the claim that existence itself has an explanation – we must find a legitimate way to draw the line between the explicability arguments we accept, as in the case of fission or causation or whatever, and the one we want to resist in the case of existence.

Resisting this pressure becomes even more urgent once we recognize that the explicability argument concerning existence is really an argument for the PSR itself. For, recall that the PSR is (on one version) the claim that for each thing that exists, there must be something in virtue of which it exists, there must be an explanation for its existence. In endorsing the explicability argument concerning existence, we are presupposing that for each thing that exists, there is something in virtue of which it exists, i.e. we are presupposing the PSR itself. And thus the pressure to accept the explicability argument concerning existence is really an argument for the PSR itself. To resist this argument, we must, again, draw a line between this explicability argument and the others that we accept.

But this line must be principled, it must not be arbitrary. For if it were an arbitrary line, then the line itself would be a brute fact, and, in the context of trying to rebut an argument for the PSR, we must not invoke any brute facts because that would be to beg the question. One cannot legitimately appeal to a brute fact in order to rebut an argument for the PSR, for the claim that there are no brute facts, because so appealing would be like appealing to the claim that Big Foot exists in order to rebut an argument for the claim that Big Foot does not exist. You cannot simply assume that Big Foot exists while trying to challenge an argument that Big Foot does not exist. Similarly, one cannot appeal to a brute fact – a brute line between explicability arguments – in attempting to challenge an argument that there are no brute facts.

So the dialectic dictates that in order to rebut an argument for the PSR, one must find a *principled* line between the explicability arguments that we accept and the explicability argument concerning existence that the opponent of the PSR needs to reject.

But what would such a principled line be? For the life of me, I cannot find one and it's not for lack of trying. A number of others have tried in conversation or correspondence to find such a line and have, I believe, failed as well.

So where does this leave us? The sequence of explicability arguments generates an argument for the PSR that we have not been able to rebut. It follows that there is genuine unrebutted pressure on us to accept the PSR, a principle with extreme consequences, concerning, as we have seen, monism and the identity of indiscernibles and the existence of a necessary being and much else – a principle that almost all philosophers want to reject but have not yet in my opinion found a legitimate way to reject. This, then, is my positive, unrebutted argument for the PSR.

## **X. Whiplash.**

But now – at the risk of incurring whiplash – let me try one more desperate move on behalf of someone who wants to resist the PSR. This is, in effect, the

nuclear option for an opponent of the PSR – and from one perspective it just might work. To see this option, let's return to monism and the argument for it. Recall that I argued for monism by appealing to a Bradleyan argument concerning relations. Relations are unintelligible because there's no way to ground them properly. This was a PSR-style argument. I employed this argument to show that there are no intelligible relations of distinctness and hence that at most there is one thing. But now I want to focus on this "at most" and ask: is there even one thing?

For there to be one thing, that thing must be intelligible and it must be intelligible in terms of its properties – how else can a thing be understood unless you appeal to some features, some properties, of the thing in terms of which we can articulate the thing, make it intelligible.

But then it seems that the intelligibility of the one thing (and of anything, really) requires a distinction between the thing and its properties. Notice that I just said "distinction". But as we saw, the PSR-argument concerning relations shows that distinctions in general are ruled out. So since for a thing to be intelligible there must be a distinction between it and its properties, and since there can be no such distinction, it follows that no thing is intelligible. Given the PSR, then, which requires that, in order for a thing to exist, it must be intelligible, there can be no thing, there can exist no thing. This result is perhaps a kind of nihilism, the thesis that no thing exists. But really it's also a very rich view because, as we saw, by rejecting distinctions which are unintelligible, we advance to a more intelligible view of reality. What we lose in terms of things or objects we more than make up in terms of intelligibility. The PSR, it turns out, may lead beyond pluralism and even beyond monism and beyond nihilism.

Does this show that the PSR is false? No, not necessarily. For if the PSR is false, what could ground its falsity? There seem to be no things available to ground the falsity of the PSR. But, equally, it is hard to see how the PSR can be true. For a claim to be true that claim must be grounded (as the PSR requires) in some thing or things. Things, it seems, ground truths – or so the PSR would lead us to believe. But then what would ground the purported truth of the PSR itself?

If the PSR is true, then (perhaps) nihilism is true and if nihilism is true, nothing can serve as the ground of the PSR or any other purported truth, including the “truth” of nihilism itself. The PSR thus seems to lead to the undermining of itself and of all other purported truths. Again, this doesn’t mean that the PSR is false for just as there are no things to ground the truth of the PSR there are no things to ground its falsity. But this result does mean that we have moved not only beyond pluralism and multiplicity, but beyond monism, and perhaps beyond truth and falsity. This is where the PSR and our rationalist adventures eventually lead – to a position that we may not even be able to rationally articulate – to a position (if we can call it that!) that seems to overturn the very notions of truth and falsity.

The PSR, I have argued, is surprisingly superior to and more intelligible than any view that denies the PSR. But the PSR also points to its own ultimate inadequacy. It is, as it might seem, a ladder that – once we have climbed it – we must kick away. And then, as Wittgenstein says in a not unrelated context<sup>15</sup>, we will see the world aright.

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<sup>1</sup> For rationalism of this variety and for a criticism of this form of rationalism, see, respectively, Leibniz, *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, and Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Much of Chomsky’s work can be seen as rationalist in this sense.

<sup>2</sup> Here and elsewhere, I will move freely between talk of facts and talk of things.

<sup>3</sup> *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 11, second demonstration (Edwin Curley (ed. and trans.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol.1, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, edited and translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> See Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, pp. 201, 325, 328-29.

<sup>6</sup> See in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*: “Primary Truths”, p. 32; *Discourse on Metaphysics*, section 9, p. 41; Correspondence with Clarke, pp. 327-28, 334. For a recent

defense of the PII along these lines, see Della Rocca, “Two Spheres, Twenty Spheres, and the Identity of Indiscernibles”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86 (2005): 480-92.

<sup>7</sup> For Aquinas’ version, see *Summa Theologicae*, part 1, question 2, article 3. For Spinoza’s version, see *Ethics*, Part 1, Proposition 11, Demonstration 3; for Leibniz’s version, see “On the Ultimate Origination of Things”, pp. 149-50, and *Monadology*, sections 36-39.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this line of argument, see Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1968), book 1, chaps. 2 and 3; van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, Third Edition, Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2008, p. 45; and Della Rocca, “Violations of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (in Leibniz and Spinoza)”, in Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 139-64.

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of monism in general, including currently popular, less radical forms of monism, see Schaffer, “Monism”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>10</sup> See especially, Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* 1.3.3. and 1.4.5; Kant’s Transcendental Dialectic in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. See also, Della Rocca, “Playing with Fire: Hume, Rationalism, and a Little Bit of Spinoza”, forthcoming in Della Rocca (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> For explorations of the connection between the PSR and necessitarianism, see Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), p. 115; Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*, (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 202-204; van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder: Westview, 2002), pp. 104-107).

<sup>12</sup> The argument that follows is based on the argument I present in my paper, “PSR”, *Philosophers’ Imprint* 10 (2010).

<sup>13</sup> “Personal Identity”, *Philosophical Review* 80 (1971): 3-27.

<sup>14</sup> *Sameness and Substance Renewed*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 72-73.

<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 6.54.