The Principle of Sufficient Reason as the Principle of the Ultimate Ground of Being

Eric v.d. Luft

The philosophical criticism of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) divides into two main camps, which I shall name the analytic[1] and the speculative.[2] Respective paradigms of the two camps are Schopenhauer[3] and Heidegger.[4] The former camp sees the topic of PSR as causality or generation,[5] and is likely to bracket, ignore, or discount the problem of infinite regress;[6] while the latter sees the topic of PSR as the ultimate ground of being (*Seinsgrund*),[7] and thus

---

1   A typical article in this tradition is: Christopher Hitchcock, "Prevention, Preemption, and the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Philosophical Review* 116, 4 (October 2007): 495-532.

2   In "On the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Polish Journal of Philosophy* 1, 1 (Spring 2007): 112, Jacek Wojtysiak designates as PSR-O, i.e., the ontological PSR, approximately what I call the speculative PSR. Within what I call the analytic PSR, he distinguishes PSR-E and PSR-M, i.e., the epistemological and methodological PSR. In "A Pragmatic Version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Philosophical Quarterly* 45, 181 (October 1995): 439-459, George N. Schlesinger discusses something akin to Wojtysiak's PSR-M. Also on the analytic side, Lois Frankel, in "From a Metaphysical Point of View: Leibniz and the Principle of Sufficient Reason." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, 3 (Fall 1986): 324, distinguishes between PSR_g = "Every true proposition has a proof" and PSR_c = "Every event or state of affairs has cause."

3   Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, translated by E.F.J. Payne (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974), cited as "*OFR*"; *Ueber die vierfache Wurzel des Satzes vom zureichenden Grunde* - 4th edition - (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1875), cited as "*UVW*." Cf. F.C. White, *On Schopenhauer's "Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason"* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992); A. Phillips Griffiths, "Wittgenstein and the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 50 (1976): 1-20; David W. Hamlyn, "Schopenhauer on the Principle of Sufficient Reason," in: *Schopenhauer: His Philosophical Achievement*, edited by Michael A. Fox (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1980), pp. 78-94.

4   Martin Heidegger, *On the Essence of Ground* [1929], translated by William McNeill, in: *Pathmarks*, edited by William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 97-135, cited as "*OEG*"; *The Principle of Reason*, translated by Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), cited as "*PR*"; *The Essence of Reasons: A Bilingual Edition, Incorporating the German Text of Vom Wesen des Grundes* [1929], translated by Terrence Malick (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1969), cited as "*ER/VWG*"; *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, translated by Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, 1992), cited as "*MFL*"; *Der Satz vom Grund* [1957] - 8th edition - (Stuttgart: Neske, 1997), cited as "*SG*." Cf. John D. Caputo, "The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Study of a Heideggerian Self-Criticism," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 13, 4 (Winter 1975): 419-426; Rudolf Allers, "Heidegger on the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 20, 3 (March 1960): 365-373.

5   Quintessential articles in this tradition are: C.F. Taeusch, "'Contiguity' and 'Sufficient Reason'," *Journal of Philosophy* 23, 15 (July 22, 1926): 407-411; and Ismay Barwell and Kathleen Lennon, "The Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 83 (1982-1983): 19-33.

6   In *The History of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: Its Metaphysical and Logical Formulations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1898), pp. 82-83, Wilbur Marshall Urban claims that Schopenhauer reduces ground, even the ground of the will, to "mechanical causation."

7   A paradigm of this kind of speculative thought is *Radical Realism: Direct Knowing in Science and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 181-188, where Edward Pols argues specifically that Leibniz's PSR cannot be understood properly in terms of causality alone, but must also be viewed in the

should reject the possibility of infinite regress.[8]

In his treatise *On the Fourfold Root*, Schopenhauer identifies four *a priori* roots or aspects of PSR, namely: (1) a moral principle, (2) a physical principle, (3) a mathematical principle, and (4) a logical principle. These four, taken together, pretty much define the analytic approach to PSR. But Schopenhauer misses the fifth root, the ultimate existential or ontological principle, i.e., what Plato calls "the real cause without which the cause would not be the cause," (*aitia kai archê*)[9] what Tillich calls "the ground of being,"[10] what Heidegger sees on the other side of the ontological difference, or that without which nothing would exist to be either a cause or an effect. This fifth root is what defines the speculative.

Schopenhauer does not understand that his so-called "roots" are not really "roots," but classes of existential instantiations of the real root, "the root without which the other roots would not be roots."[11] His four-root analysis of PSR thus commits a category mistake. Here are Sills Hall, Hyde Hall, Coles Tower, and Pickard Theater, but where is Bowdoin College? Here are the moral root, the physical root, the mathematical root, and the logical root, but where is PSR?[12]

Analytic versions of PSR are generally conceived in response to problems raised by the First and Second Ways of Thomas Aquinas, while speculative versions are consistent with - and perhaps even equivalent to - the Third Way. Speculatively understood, PSR is a version of the Third Way.[13] Moreover, PSR is necessarily involved in all arguments for the reality of God, both cosmological[14] and ontological. Recognizing the interrelatedness and even complementarity of particular arguments for the reality of God can strengthen each separate argument involved in the relation. The ontological and cosmological arguments are complementary insofar as to understand the nature of being and existence to the extent that therefrom one may infer the reality of God (as in the ontological argument) is essentially the same as to understand the nature of necessity and contingency to the extent of the same inference (as in the Third Way).[15] Never mind that Aquinas himself rejected the ontological argument. He did not understand it properly. Again, he thus falls short of the truly speculative. That is, he did not grasp that his own Third Way would be better called "the argument from the nature of existence itself" than either "the argument from possibility and necessity" or "the argument from the contingency of the world." In other words, the Third Way is the empirical version of the ontological argument and the ontological argument is the *a priori* version of the Third Way.

PSR is usually and disproportionately associated with Leibniz (even though it was first clearly formulated by Leibniz's disciple Wolff), but it can be traced much further back. It occurs embryonically in Plato, *Timaeus,* 28a; *Phaedo,* 99b; more substantially and coherently in Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 71b8-12; and, following Aristotle, in Aquinas, I *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 15. Thus it should probably best be called something like "Aristotle's principle of ground."[16]

light of his whole system, Platonic metaphysics, first principles, fundamental ontology, and ultimately God as the ground of causality itself.

8   Eric v.d. Luft, *God, Evil, and Ethics: A Primer in the Philosophy of Religion* (North Syracuse, New York: Gegensatz Press, 2004), Chapter 2, "Is God Real?", pp. 15-16, 37.

9   Plato, *Phaedo*, 99b. Cf. Edward Pols, *Meditation on a Prisoner: Towards Understanding Action and Mind* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press; London: Feffer & Simons, 1975), pp. 4-5.

Typical - but not all - cosmological arguments and their defenses treat PSR as axiomatic.[17] Aquinas's formulation in I *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 15, is: "Omne autem quod est possibile esse, causam habet: quia, cum de se aequaliter se habeat ad duo, scilicet esse et non esse, oportet, si ei approprietur esse, quod hoc sit ex aliqua causa." = "All that is possible to be has a cause, because, insofar as it is equally related to both being and non-being, only by some cause could it acquire being" (my translation). Neither Plato, Aristotle, nor Aquinas apparently saw any need to prove or defend it.[18] For them, any person would be obtuse who could not see the plain fact that for anything that exists there must be a cause or reason why it exists. Nevertheless, while those on the speculative side tend to see it as self-evident, *a priori*, or axiomatic, and while those on the analytic side tend to see it as *a posteriori* and thus try either

---

10 Yet a discussion of PSR is conspicuously absent from Paul Tillich's corpus, insofar as its speculative versions would offer strong support for his point of view. Nevertheless, he writes in *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), vol. 1, pp. 155-156: "The ground of revelation is not its 'cause,' in the categorical sense of the word 'cause.' It is the 'ground of being' manifest in existence. ... 'Ground' ... oscillates between cause and substance and transcends both of them. ... The religious word for what is called the ground of being is God."

11 Heidegger regards Schopenhauer's analysis of PSR as superficial and misbegotten. Cf. *MFL*, pp. 112-115.

12 Cf. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1949), pp. 16-17.

13 In "On a Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Religious Studies* 39, 3 (September 2003): 269-286, Brian Leftow argues against Norman Kretzmann that we cannot use "Every existing thing has a reason for its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other beings" as a formulation of PSR to support a proof of the reality of God. Kretzmann had claimed in *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in "Summa Contra Gentiles I"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), and *The Metaphysics of Creation: Aquinas's Natural Theology in "Summa Contra Gentiles II"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) to have detected such a proof in Aquinas.

14 In "Two Criticisms of the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 21, 3 (January 1987): 130, Lloyd P. Gerson denies that "the PSR could ... function ... as a cosmological argument ... without additional premises."

15 Eric von der Luft, "The Empirical Version of the Ontological Argument and the *A Priori* Version of the Cosmological Argument," in *Existence of God: Essays from the Basic Issues Forum*, edited by John R. Jacobson and Robert Lloyd Mitchell (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), pp. 149-161.

16 Aristotle is often shortchanged in such misattributions. Ockham's razor, for instance, would be better called "Aristotle's Razor." William of Ockham, *De Sacramento Altaris*, Ch. 28; *Sententiae*, I, d. 14, q. 2, G; *Sententiae*, I, d. 30, q. 1, D. Aristotle, *De Caelo*, 302b21; *Physics*, 259a12; *Metaphysics*, 990a34; *Metaphysics*, 991a9. W.M. Thorburn, "The Myth of Ockham's Razor," *Mind* 27, 107 (July 1918): 345-353. Luft, Eric v.d., "Ockham's Razor." *Scientific Thought: In Context*, edited by Brenda Wilmoth Lerner and K. Lee Lerner (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Gale Cengage Learning, 2008), vol. 2, pp. 950-954.

17 For conflicting views on the relationship between PSR and cosmological arguments, cf. N.M.L. Nathan, "Exclusion and Sufficient Reason," *Philosophy* 85, 333 (July 2010): 391-397; William L. Rowe, "The Cosmological Argument and the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Man and World* 1 (1968): 278-292; and Bernard D. Katz; Elmar J. Kremer, "The Cosmological Argument Without the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Faith and Philosophy* 14, 1 (January 1997): 62-70.

18 Scott McDonald, "Theory of Knowledge," *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, edited by Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 179: "Aquinas ... takes basic metaphysical principles of this sort, his versions of principles of sufficient reason, to be immediate propositions knowable by virtue of themselves. Of course, one might object ... that these metaphysical principles themselves are not obviously self-evident. But ... given his view of what it is for a proposition to be knowable by virtue of itself, this complaint ... cannot convict Aquinas of any inconsistency or incoherence."

to prove or disprove it,[19] the question of whether PSR is self-evident and incontrovertible or subject to proof remains widely discussed.

Quentin Smith, for example, underestimates the power of PSR and thus offers only a weak defense of it.[20] His apparent inability to perceive a stronger line of defense probably stems from his own four formulations of PSR, each of which refers to the question of reasons for "each true proposition" (p. 97) instead of the more fundamental question of reasons for each existent event or entity. His mistake, in other words, is couching the defense of PSR in the terminology of the meta-level rather than the object-level. PSR properly accounts for things that are, as well as for the words about these things.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, A201-A204, B246-B249, Kant attempts to prove PSR by reading it as "the ground of possible experience" or of "the objective knowledge of phenomena ... in sequential temporal order." He sees PSR as relevant only to issues of causal succession, or specifically in reaction to Hume's criticisms of causality, and thus considers PSR as either more basic than or equivalent to the principle of causal relation. Schopenhauer follows and amplifies Kant, thus establishing himself as foremost in the analytic school of interpreting PSR.

No proof of PSR is likely to be forthcoming, not because PSR is false or problematic, but because it is axiomatic and self-evident. PSR is not inferential. It is not a sequential argument. Rather, it is "analytic" in the sense that to understand it requires only to "unpack," as it were, the concepts which are already contained within it as soon as it is stated. In this way it resembles the so-called pre-reflective Cartesian *cogito*, i.e., the immediate, intuitive awareness that we exist as soon as we are aware that we think, a natural awareness which is logically prior to and independent of the "*ergo*" in "*cogito ergo sum*."

Philosophers who attempt to either defend or refute PSR by means of "evidence" are missing the fundamental point of PSR. For example, a defense of PSR[21] is weak and inadequate if it looks for *a posteriori* "evidence" that PSR is true rather than trying to unpack the meaning and logical consequences of PSR considered as a self-evident *a priori* principle. The "evidence" cited in such cases is not only empirical, but can also take the form of innovations in logic, epistemology, or rhetoric. To a speculative thinker, these undertakings may seem digressive or even sophistical. The use of "possible worlds" is representative of this approach. Thus a real red herring would be trying to apply PSR to other "possible worlds" and then showing that a "possible worlds" formulation of PSR is false. But those who do so would still have to admit that the preferred, but from their point of view weaker, formulation, "If x is a contingent state of affairs, and x is realized, then there is a state of affairs y [which may be either contingent or necessary] such that (i) y is realized and (ii) x is explained by y," is true when restricted to this actual world.[22] In the same vein but conversely, some argue that a "possible worlds"

---

19 Schopenhauer, although the fountainhead of the analytic side of the PSR debate, was not an analytic philosopher himself, any more than Kant was, *avant la lettre*. Unlike subsequent analytic philosophers, Schopenhauer avows that PSR is *a priori* and criticizes Wolff for trying to prove it (*UVW*, §§ 10-11, 14; *OFR*, pp. 24-27, 31-32).

20 Quentin Smith, "A Defense of the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Metaphilosophy* 26, 1-2 (January-April 1995): 97-106.

21 E.g., Mark T. Nelson, "The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Moral Argument," *Religious Studies* 32, 1 (March 1996): 15-26.

22 Christopher S. Hill, "On a Revised Version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Pacific Philosophical*

formulation can defend PSR.[23]

     As an extreme case on the analytic side, Chad Allen argues that PSR is neither self-evident nor supportable by any other principle.[24] But Allen's rebuttal of several arguments in favor of PSR[25] is syllogistic legerdemain that fails to account for the fact that events and entities really do come into being in this world. Allen seems to reduce all causality to efficient, temporal, "billiard ball" causality. He fails to recognize that the "cause" of an event or entity may be just the "reason" (*Grund*) for its being or the set of all the necessary preconditions of its existence, including every consideration from an immediate efficient cause to a universal Tillichian "ground of being." That is, he fails to recognize that the reality of the universe could rest upon some species of atemporal causality, e.g., Aristotelian formal, material, or, more likely, final causality. Thus he offers only a context-specific, hypothetical interpretation of a severely truncated PSR. His argument against Sullivan tries to reduce PSR to an empirical principle, i.e., he sets up the proposition, "... since many of the things we see around us appear to have causes, we have a good reason to think that everything has a cause" (p. 560), as a straw man, then easily refutes it.

     Most of the thought about PSR subsequent to Aristotle, even in the broad Platonic tradition, has occurred on the analytic rather than the speculative side, using PSR to explain chains of causality. A noteworthy exception is Spinoza, who uses PSR as a key part of his argument for a single, infinite, eternal, universal substance,[26] and thus, despite Leibniz's objections to his monism, shows himself as well within the tradition of using PSR to prove the reality of necessary being. Seeing PSR only in terms of causality, especially efficient or other empirically known causality, leads to serious problems such as were first voiced by Hume.[27] It was obvious to Aquinas that if causality or generation were allowed to regress infinitely, then nothing would exist. But something does exist, therefore such infinite regress is impossible. Leibniz, Hegel, and Heidegger all accept this insight, which is the essence of the Third Way.

     One classic defense of the Third Way never questions PSR, but claims that the Third Way does not depend upon it and that the proof of God from PSR in I *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 15, reduces to either the Second or Fourth Way, not to the Third, as is usually supposed.[28] But to whichever of the Five Ways it is most closely related, PSR emphasizes causality as the ultimate ground of cosmological arguments. Thus this defense falls short of the truly speculative, insofar as the speculative PSR does not depend on causality, especially efficient causality, nor formal, material, or even final causality, but rather on the nature of ontology

     Quarterly 63, 3 (July 1982): 236.

23 E.g., Gordon Belot, "The Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Journal of Philosophy* 98, 2 (February 2001): 55-74.

24 Chad Allen, "The Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Uncaused Beginning of the Universe," *Dialogue (Canada)*, 36, 3 (Summer 1997): 555-562.

25 E.g., those of William Lane Craig, John Leslie, and Thomas D. Sullivan.

26 Daniel Whiting, "Spinoza, the No Shared Attribute Thesis, and the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19, 3 (May 2011): 543-548. For a sympathetic reading of Spinoza's use of PSR and an extrapolation of PSR in a Spinozistic direction, cf. Michael Della Rocca, "A Rationalist Manifesto: Spinoza and the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Philosophical Topics* 31, 1-2 (Spring-Fall 2003): 75-93.

27 E.g., in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section III.

28 Thomas Kevin Connolly, "The Basis of the Third Proof for the Existence of God," *Thomist* 17, 3 (July 1954): 283, 298, 346-367.

itself. All we have to do is unpack the meaning of ontology - as Heidegger did - to discover the meaning and importance of PSR. Paradoxically (or ironically), the speculative PSR is "analytic" in that sense. Its meaning lies within itself, not in pointing toward anything else.

Infinite regress arguments - i.e., arguments which deny the possibility of infinite regress - for the reality of the ground of being, or first principle, which some call God, have never been successfully challenged. Those who claim to refute such arguments do not muster counterarguments, but only dismiss or reject them out of hand, as if it were self-evident that infinite regress is either a non-issue or a red herring in philosophy. A clear case in point is Russell's discussion of the Second Way.[29] Aquinas, following Aristotle, argues that since there cannot be an infinite regress of efficient causes, there must be a first cause which is itself uncaused. Russell, to the contrary, asserts that if anything has a cause - which, in Russell's post-Humean universe, is a big "if" - then God, the alleged "first cause," must also have a cause, and so on, infinitely backwards. Such an attitude long predates Russell and gave rise to the popular "It's turtles all the way down!" argument against infinite regress in cosmology.[30] Russell's failure, and the failure of all who accept the possibility of infinite regress, is in remaining mired in efficient causality and thus neither comprehending nor even acknowledging the concept of ultimate ontological causality, i.e., ground. Russell also shows an inadequate concept of God. He imagines God as a finite being like us, or like Zeus, Wotan, or Ganesha, with attributes, rather than as the infinite ground of being, the Godhead with no attributes. In other words, the God he denies is a God which he made of straw and is thus easy to deny. But, if he understood infinite regress properly, and PSR properly, then he could not deny God without at the same time denying himself and the whole contingent world.

One logical consequence of Russell's implication that either the world is uncaused or that its causality enjoys infinite regress is that the world is either eternal rather than created or does not exist at all. Obviously, the world exists; hence we are left to decide only whether it is eternal or created. If the world is created, then there must be a first, self-caused cause (*causa sui*), which has no reason why it is in itself, but is necessarily the logical and ontological terminus of any infinite regress. If the world is eternal, then, against Russell, its existence would still require a *causa sui*, though we could not then legitimately apply the word "first" to it, since it would be universally pervasive. An eternal world perhaps be one of mutual interaction for which the ultimate theological principle would be Newton's third law of motion - which asserts that each physical force is met with an equal and opposite force - and its subsequent corollary conservation laws for momentum and energy. Whether the world is eternal or created, either way it needs a ground of being - and this is a key point in the understanding of the speculative PSR. In other words, PSR still implies ultimate ontological causality whether we believe the world either created or eternal. If the world is created, then its *causa sui* is its first or original cause; if the world is eternal, then its *causa sui* is no less its cause, albeit coeval with all its effects. If the world is created, then its ground is both creating and sustaining; if it is eternal, then its ground is only sustaining. Some, like Heidegger, would

---

29 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Clarion, 1957), pp. 6-7.

30 Sometimes attributed to Russell or to William James, but cf. *Great Discussion of the Origin, Authority, and Tendency of the Bible, Between Rev. J.F. Berg, D.D., of Philadelphia, and Joseph Barker, of Ohio* (Boston: Yerrington, 1854), p. 48. The anecdote is derived ultimately from the ancient Hindu myth of the world supported by an elephant supported by a tortoise.

call this infinite ground simply "being" (*Sein*); others, like Leibniz, Wolff, and their school, would call it "God"; still others, like Schopenhauer and Russell, would either overlook or deny it.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the long history of PSR, the first philosopher to recognize the ultimate or absolute ontological significance of PSR was Heidegger, although inklings of this speculative interpretation exist in Aristotle, Aquinas, Leibniz, and Hegel. Not even Wolff or Leibniz's other main disciple, Baumgarten, managed to move beyond the merely analytic view of PSR.[31] That is, PSR for Leibniz proves God via a causal argument. The inference is trivial. Heidegger is very critical of Leibniz on this point, claiming that Leibniz, even though he derived his God from metaphysics, never got away from merely ontic thinking to cross over into pure ontology.[32] Analytic thought about PSR occurs only in what Heidegger would call the ontic realm, never touching the truly ontological ground of whatever exists.

Just as, for Leibniz, the reality of God follows trivially from PSR, so for Heidegger, the reality of being (*Sein*) behind beings (*Seiende*) follows trivially from it. That is, the speculatively interpreted PSR immediately answers Heidegger's question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" There is something rather than nothing because the ontological must become ontic in order to be known as ontological.[33] Because a cause would not be a cause unless it had an effect; hence the effect is, in effect, the cause of the cause being a cause. PSR transcends the ontological difference and provides a genuine ontological reason for the existence and succession of ontic beings, not just a series of ontic reasons for this existence and succession. Without Heideggerian being (*Sein*) *qua causa sui*, nothing would be. That is, unless there were being in general, there would be no particular beings; no entities would exist. In other words, for Heidegger, PSR points directly beyond the ontic and toward the ontological, whereas for other philosophers (such as Schopenhauer and Russell), it points only toward other aspects of the ontic.

"Nothing is without a reason why it is" or "Nothing is without a ground of its being" means not only that everything is an effect and therefore has a cause, but also that every cause, in order to be a cause at all, must have an effect, else it would be just an inert, effete, featureless blob of nothingness in itself.[34] Every "thing" (*Seiendes*) is a predicate,[35] i.e., an effect, contingent upon something else. The *Grund* in PSR may refer either to (1) the cause of an effect, (2) the reason why a proposition is true, or (3) the ultimate ground of the existence of entities. In the third case the *Grund* is the *Seinsgrund* and is ontologically different from any other kind of *Grund*. In the first two cases the *Grund* is ontologically of the same type as the effect or the proposition; i.e., it is, like them, a finite entity with properties. Analytic philosophy would typically regard the third case as nonsense. But for Heidegger, ground = being, i.e., the ultimate cause of beings is being itself. We experience *Sein* as *Grund*.[36] With just a slight

31 Cf. G.J. Mattey, "Lecture Notes: The Leibniz-Wolff Metaphysics"
    <hume.ucdavis.edu/mattey/phi175/leiblec.html> (accessed December 30, 2013).
32 Cf. Hans Ruin, "Leibniz and Heidegger on Sufficient Reason," *Studia Leibnitiana* 30, 1 (1998): 49-67.
33 Christian thinkers, or at least thinkers more theistically or theologically inclined than Heidegger, might express the same insight as: "God must become human in order to be known as God" or " God must create in order to be God."
34 Cf. "Nichts ist ohne Grund" vs. "Jegliches/Jedes Seiende hat einen Grund." (*SG*, pp. 16-17).
35 *SG*, p. 23.
36 *SG*, p. 210; *PR*, p. 129.

change of terminology, not of content, the following passage would make Heidegger sound almost theistic:

> Because beings (*jedes Seiende*) are brought into being by being *qua* ground/reason (*Grund*), every being inevitably is alloted a ground/reason. For otherwise it would not be (*seiend*). Understood as the fundamental principle of rendering sufficient reason (*Grundsatz vom zuzustellenden zureichenden Grund*), the principle of reason (*Satz vom Grund*) is thereby true only because a word of being (*Wort vom Sein*) speaks in it that says" being and ground/reason: the same (*Sein und Grund: das Selbe*).[37]

The early and the later Heidegger each wrote a small book about PSR: *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (*On the Essence of Ground*) in 1929 and *Der Satz vom Grund* (*The Principle of Ground*) in 1957, the latter a critique of the former. One purpose of *VWG* is to define the ontological difference,[38] and one purpose of *SG* is to refine this definition further. Radically inquisitive as usual, Heidegger in *VWG* probes whether "das Problem des Grundes" is even raised by PSR at all.[39] For Heidegger, PSR points toward bridging the gap between beings and being by understanding the ontological difference. To understand PSR we must understand and accept the ontological difference. Such understanding is, at least on one level, immediate, pre-reflective, and pre-articulate,[40] like Sartre's pre-reflective *cogito*.[41] The last few paragraphs of Lecture 12 in the later work, on calculative vs. meditative thinking (*rechnendes* vs. *besinnliches Denken*),[42] imply that calculative thinking is inevitably ontic but that meditative thinking can eventually become ontological, and thus lead us to recognize the other side explicitly. The other side of the ontological divide from us does not include the efficient, material, formal, or even final cause of any particular entities. Rather, there is only their ground. The ground of being is being, i.e., being is its own ground. It is *causa sui* (cause of itself) - or better said - *ratio sui* (ground of itself), *der selbstgegründete Grund* (self-grounded ground), or *der sich gründende Grund* (self-grounding ground).

The Latin word *ratio* and the English word "reason" can each translate either the German *Grund* or the German *Vernunft*. *Ratio*, as Aquinas uses it in I *Contra Gentiles*, 15, and as Leibniz and Wolff use it whenever they refer to *principium rationis sufficientis*, would properly translate the Greek *logos*,[43] not *archê* or *aition*, which both mean "cause."[44] The meaning of *logos* is *Grund*, i.e., "reason in the sense of foundation, basis, cause, or ground," not *Vernunft*,

---

37 *PR*, p. 125; *SG*, p. 205. Note how Lilly translates *Grund* bivalently as "ground/reason."
38 *ER/VWG*, pp. 2-3; *OEG*, p. 97.
39 *ER/VWG*, pp. 6-9; *OEG*, pp. 100-107.
40 In "The Ontological Difference," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33, 4 (October 1996): 357-374, Graeme Nicholson claims that we each have a "pre-ontological awareness of being," but that it takes someone like Heidegger to articulate it.
41 Cf. Jay F. Rosenberg, "Apperception and Sartre's Pre-Reflective *Cogito*," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18, 3 (July 1981): 255-260.
42 *PR*, pp. 100-101.
43 John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), p. 150.
44 Cf. *OEG*, p. 98; p. 367, n. 5.

i.e., "reason in the sense of intellect, intelligence, or judgment." For Heidegger, PSR says nothing about reason; rather, its subject matter is "beings" (*Seiende*) and their ground. It says something about the ontology of their "ontic-ness." The word "reason" suggests design or intention; the word "ground" is rather neutral on this point. Accordingly, in English, it may be more precise to speak of "The Principle of Sufficient Ground"[45] - but tradition is against us,[46] just as it is in the case of that horrid translation of Kant's term, *Anschauung*, as 'intuition' (from the Latin false cognate, *intuitus*).[47] In Latin, *ratio* is ambiguous; in German, *Grund* is not.

Atheists should fear the speculative PSR. It undermines their whole philosophy at a snap. The reality of God follows trivially from it. The rub, however, comes with trying to describe God. For those who believe that theism cannot be proved, agnosticism is a philosophically safe and sound position, as, for example, Russell was careful to claim in his famous 1948 BBC debate with Copleston.[48] Atheism, on the other hand, is philosophically unsafe and unsound, insofar as it denies ultimate causality and thus, despite itself, even denies that we ourselves exist.

Sartre recognizes that to be his kind of atheist, in which being itself is not necessary, all is only possibility, and even the absolute is contingent, entails rejecting PSR.[49] Accordingly Sartre's world is absurd.[50] Even though he "proves" being, and the transphenomenality of being, from a version of the ontological argument based on the pre-reflective Cartesian *cogito*,[51] the existentialism of Sartre does not find sufficient reason for anything, and the appropriate response of the *pour-soi* to such a world is alienation and a feeling of absurdity.[52] Living in a world in which we do not affirm PSR is not easy. But Sartre's philosophy of radical freedom never seeks comfort.

Heidegger, just as much as Sartre, also preserves freedom, despite the necessity of the relationship between *Sein* and *Seiende*, i.e., the necessity of *Sein* in contrast to the contingency of *Seiende*. Heidegger asks whether PSR, as necessarily and universally determinative, either denies human freedom or points toward a ground that does. He concludes that it does not, and moreover asserts that freedom is the basis, essence, or ground of ground itself.[53]

---

45 John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978), pp. 49, 73-79, 95, 261.

46 It may help, whenever you see the abbreviation "PSR," to think of *principium sufficientis RATIONIS* rather than "principle of sufficient REASON."

47 Eric von der Luft, *Hegel, Hinrichs, and Schleiermacher on Feeling and Reason in Religion* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen, 1987), pp. 173-179.

48 Frequently reprinted; for example, in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, edited by Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1987), pp. 5-11.

49 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), pp. 128-129.

50 Donald A. Crosby, *The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism* (Albany: SUNY, 1988), p. 384, n. 5.

51 Sartre, pp. 21-24.

52 Sebastian Gardner, "The Transcendental Dimension of Sartre's Philosophy," in: *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*, edited by Jonathan Webber (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 65.

53 *MFL*, pp. 115-116, 213-214; *ER/VWG*, pp. 125-127; *PR*, p. 124. In *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 10, Heidegger claims that Schelling's philosophy of freedom fails because it is not really a philosophy of freedom at all, but a philosophy of being, as all philosophies must be, insofar as we cannot escape from being.

The ontological difference for the allegedly atheist Heidegger between beings (*Seiende*) and being (*Sein*) is practically the same as the "complete otherness" (*ganz Andersein*) for the theists Schleiermacher, Otto, and Tillich between creatures and God. Especially God's "aseity" (*aseitas*), which Schleiermacher took over from medieval scholasticism,[54] refers to a quality of God which Heidegger would call "ontological," as opposed to the "ontic-ness" of creatures/beings.[55]

One last point about the connection between PSR and Ockham's razor: They could be seen in relation to each other as not exactly complements, but as opposite versions of a single implicit admonition to try to achieve an Aristotelian mean of explanations. That is, the one urges us not to posit too few explanatory factors, while the other urges us not to posit too many. By the speculative PSR we can say *that* there is a ground, reason, or cause for the being of the entire world or universe, but we cannot say *what* that ground, reason, or cause. This is the standard theological problem of knowing *that* God is (*quod sit*), but not knowing *what* God is (*quid sit*). Ockham's razor can never be at odds with the *quod sit*, but must always be at odds with the *quid sit*. If a simple and a complicated explanation, each *fully* adequate to fit the facts of some case, compete with each other for acceptance in that case, the simple is always to be preferred because we ought not to posit the existence or reality of anything unless we must. This winnowing process would exclude from the sphere of *knowledge* most of the dogmas of most of the particular religions of the world, and relegate such dogmas to the sphere of *faith*. For example, the reality of God *per se* (*quod sit*) is a matter of knowledge (through the proofs and through PSR), but the reality of Jesus Christ, Krishna, or Glooskap (each an example of *quid sit*) are, partially because of Ockham's razor, matters of faith alone, since there can be no *knowledge* of Jesus Christ, Krishna, or Glooskap, but only stories and *beliefs* about them.[56]

The proofs - ontological, cosmological, teleological, moral - only demonstrate the reality or necessity of some presence which must be completely different from the world. They do not give us any specific information about the Judaeo-Christian God, or Allah, or Brahman, or any nameable deity. Rather, they only show us *that* there must be (*quod sit*) what Aristotle calls *energeia*; what Aquinas (following Aristotle) calls *actus purus*; what Hinduism calls Brahman Nirguna; what the Pseudo-Dionysius calls the "superessential"; what Plotinus calls *to hen*; what Eckhart calls the Godhead; what Otto calls the "numinous," the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, or (following Schleiermacher) *das ganz Andere*; or, perhaps most to the point, the Tillichian "ground of being." Neither PSR nor the theistic proofs say anything about the attributes or character of this presence. That is because this presence is ontological and infinite, not ontic or finite, and that is why Heidegger calls it *Sein*. To personify, anthropomorphize, worship, pray to, or otherwise pretend that we can have any certain knowledge of, justifiable beliefs about, or personal contact with *Sein*, this essentially Aristotelian God, is not possible. Through the speculative PSR we can be certain *that* God is real (*haecceitas*), but we cannot be justified in believing anything about *what* God is (*quidditas*). There can be no human knowledge of divine attributes or character; i.e., any judgments about *what* such a presence actually is (*quid sit*) must remain matters of faith and imagination.

---

54 F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube* - 7th edition [i.e., 2nd edition, 1830-1831] - (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1960), v. 1, pp. 287-289; § 54 *Zusatz*.

55 Cf. *Sein und Zeit*, §§ 3-4.

56 Cf. Luft, "Ockham's Razor," pp. 950-954.