

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

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The philosophical criticism of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) divides into two main camps, which I shall name the "analytic" and the "speculative." Respective paradigms of the two camps are Schopenhauer and Heidegger. The former camp sees the topic of PSR as causality or generation, and is likely to bracket, ignore, or discount the problem of infinite regress; while the latter sees the topic of PSR as the ultimate ground of being, and thus should reject the possibility of infinite regress.

PSR is usually associated with Leibniz (even though it was first clearly formulated by Leibniz's disciple Wolff), but it can be traced as far back as Plato, e.g., *Timaeus* 28a, *Phaedo* 99b. Most of this thought, even the Platonic, has occurred on the "analytic" side, using PSR to explain chains of causality. But seeing PSR only in terms of causality, especially empirical causality, leads to serious problems such as were first voiced by Hume.

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 Aquinas, Leibniz, and Hegel. Not even Wolff or Leibniz's other main disciple, Baumgarten, managed to move beyond the merely "analytic" view of PSR.

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. It is the essence of Aquinas's Third Way. Moreover, PSR is necessarily involved in all arguments for the reality of God, both cosmological and ontological.

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. "Analytic" thought about PSR occurs only in what Heidegger would call the ontic realm, and never touches the truly ontological ground of whatever exists. But "speculatively" interpreted, PSR answers the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" 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. In other words, for Heidegger, PSR points directly beyond the ontic and toward the ontological, whereas for other philosophers, it points only toward other aspects of the ontic.

One traditional question about PSR is whether it is self-evident and incontrovertible or subject to proof. 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." Seeing PSR as relevant only to issues of causal succession, or specifically in reaction to Hume's criticisms of causality, leads Kant to consider PSR as either more basic than or equivalent to the principle of causal relation. Schopenhauer, in his famous treatise *On the Fourfold Root*, follows and amplifies Kant, thus establishing himself as foremost in the "analytic" school of interpreting PSR.