

REASON UNBOUND: A NEO-RATIONALIST MANIFESTO

Dissertation Summary

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The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) holds that everything has an explanation. My dissertation defends the PSR—a principle many take to be a prime tenet of the rationalist metaphysics of Leibniz and Spinoza—from three influential challenges: (1) that we lack reason to accept the PSR; (2) that the principle is inconsistent with the now widespread recognition of metaphysically fundamental facts; (3) that the PSR entails that the world could not have been otherwise. By answering these challenges, I resist the contemporary dismissal of this central rationalist tenet. To endorse the PSR requires rejecting any view that admits unexplained or ‘brute’ facts. But such views are pervasive in contemporary metaphysics. My dissertation therefore lays the foundation for a substantial revision of the current metaphysical landscape.

I first argue that a commitment to the PSR is indispensable to metaphysical inquiry. A subject engages in ‘metaphysical inquiry’ when she seeks, for some fact, to understand why that fact obtains. Much as the indispensability of mathematical entities to scientific practice provides reason to accept the existence of these entities, the indispensability of a commitment to the PSR to metaphysical inquiry provides an answer to the first challenge. My argument rests upon a surprisingly minimal foundation. This foundation is the very general and relatively uncontroversial action-theoretic thesis that if a subject intends to perform an action, she commits herself to being able to perform that action. I use this thesis to argue that when a subject seeks to explain any arbitrary fact, she commits herself to every fact having an explanation, i.e. to the PSR.

The second challenge to the PSR presupposes a widely accepted metaphysical dogma: that a fact is fundamental just if it lacks metaphysical explanation. I answer the challenge by developing a view of fundamentality on which whether a fact is fundamental is determined relative to a building relation. In doing so, I overturn the dogmatic equation of fundamentality with the absence of any metaphysical explanation. I first show that if fundamentality is absolute inexplicability, the concept of fundamentality can neither perform necessary theoretical work, nor accommodate potential first-order commitments in metaphysics. I focus, in particular, on the commitment to metaphysical emergence. Second, I argue that my alternative conception of fundamentality not only better accommodates potential first-order commitments in metaphysics, but also better captures a prime explanatory role filled by the facts we designate as ‘fundamental’: that of providing an unproblematic stopping point for explanation.

The third challenge charges that the PSR entails that the world could not have been otherwise. I argue that it rests upon an uncritical acceptance of a principle governing metaphysical explanation: Necessitation. According to this principle, if one fact metaphysically explains another, then necessarily, if the first fact obtains then the other does as well. I answer the challenge by first establishing a crucial distinction between perspectival facts (which include the contingent facts) and non-perspectival facts (which include at least some necessary facts). I then show that Necessitation tacitly involves a principled restriction that is such that the assignment of the first fact in the principle constrains which fact can be assigned as the second fact. In particular, if the first fact is non-perspectival, the second must also be non-perspectival. I motivate this restriction by arguing for an analogous restriction in the metaphysics of time; I then show that the conclusions drawn in the temporal case extend to the modal case. My argument both entails that Necessitation holds of only some metaphysical explanations, and generates a principled way of determining those explanations for which it does not hold.