

REASON UNBOUND: A NEO-RATIONALIST MANIFESTO

Dissertation Summary

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) states that everything has an explanation. My dissertation defends a commitment to 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 PSR is inconsistent with the widespread recognition that there are metaphysically fundamental facts; (3) that the PSR entails that the world could not have been otherwise. By answering these challenges, I resist the contemporary and almost universal 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 to understand why a 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 a fact, she commits herself to every fact having an explanation, i.e. to the PSR.

The second challenge to the PSR alleges that the principle is inconsistent with a commitment to fundamental facts. Because fundamental facts do crucial explanatory work in metaphysics, such as (I argue) providing an unproblematic stopping point for explanation, giving up fundamental facts would be a significant cost. Most proponents of the PSR—including Leibniz and Spinoza—have assumed that they can recognize fundamental facts only if they sacrifice either the irreflexivity or the asymmetry of explanation. I offer a novel solution that avoids this sacrifice. I show that the alleged inconsistency arises only on an absolutist conception of fundamentality: a conception on which a fact cannot be both fundamental and not fundamental in the same world at the same time. I argue instead for a relativized conception of fundamentality, on which whether a fact counts as fundamental is determined relative to a metaphysical dependence relation (a relation like composition, constitution, realization, set-membership, and so on). On my proposed view, facts that are fundamental relative to one metaphysical dependence relation can also be explained relative to another metaphysical dependence relation, thus preserving the PSR.

The third challenge charges that the PSR entails that the world could not have been otherwise. I argue that this challenge rests upon an uncritical acceptance of a principle governing metaphysical explanation: the principle that no necessary fact can, on its own, explain a contingent fact. I answer the challenge by showing that the principle is false. The falsity of this principle also entails the falsity of Necessitation, the widely endorsed principle according to which if one fact metaphysically explains another, then necessarily, if the first fact obtains then so does the second. My argument proceeds by showing, first, that in the temporal case, a temporary fact (one that obtains at some but not all times) can be explained by an eternal fact (one that obtains at all times). I then argue that a parallel argument in the modal case shows that a contingent fact can be explained by a necessary fact. A crucial upshot of my argument is that it allows a proponent of the PSR to be committed to contingent facts.