

# PSR

Michael Della Rocca

*Yale University*

© 2010 Michael Della Rocca

<[www.philosophersimprint.org/010007/](http://www.philosophersimprint.org/010007/)>

*"Has not everybody made use of this principle upon a thousand occasions?"*

—Leibniz to Clarke<sup>1</sup>

PLEASE DON'T LET ME START. The beginning is so seductive that once I get going, it's hard for me to stop. And even when I am relentlessly pursuing this line of thought, as I am wont to do, a part of me really wants to stop because I know that this pursuit can win me few friends and allies. And where does this line of thought lead? Straight to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, the PSR, that forlorn principle according to which, for each thing (object, state of affairs, or whatever) that exists or obtains, there is an explanation of its existence, there is a reason that it exists.<sup>2</sup>

I can see now how it will go because I have rehearsed it all before. I begin with certain extremely natural and well-nigh undeniable claims concerning explicability, concerning whether certain things can be allowed to be inexplicable. Then, on this uncontroversial basis, I seek gradually to ratchet up the pressure on you to accept the PSR, to embrace the view that *no* fact is inexplicable — or so the oft-rehearsed progression goes. I then build on these moves to mount a more direct argument for the PSR that, perhaps, makes the pressure to accept the PSR extremely difficult to resist.

But I know in advance how quixotic my attempt will be, for it is quite an understatement to say that the PSR has fallen on hard times and that pleas on its behalf now almost universally fall on deaf ears. This is so for many reasons. First of all, previous attempts to argue for the PSR have been remarkably ineffectual.<sup>3</sup> Second, there have been

1. In Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), p. 346. Versions of several paragraphs in the first half of this paper appear also in Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008), chapter 8.
2. Alternatively, if we focus on truths instead of things or states of affairs, we might say that, for each truth, there is an explanation of its truth.
3. See, e.g., Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, in Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671–1678*, translated by Robert C. Sleigh, Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 33. See also the discussion in Robert Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 68.

the attacks on the PSR. It's not as if philosophers have devised the odd counterexample that a few epicycles could patch up. Oh no, the situation is much worse than that. It sometimes seems as though, over the last, say, 271 years, a great deal of the best efforts of the best philosophers have been devoted to a direct frontal assault on the PSR. Despite their obvious and profound differences, Hume and Kant, for example, made it their mission to articulate and argue for a world-view structured around the claim that the PSR is simply false. Such attacks have been enormously influential to the point that they are simply taken for granted and philosophers now tend to presuppose — un-self-consciously operate under the assumption — that the PSR is false (or, as we shall see, operate under this assumption when it suits them to do so). Philosophers often blithely admit certain so-called brute facts into their system and see such admissions as incurring no philosophical costs. And even worse — as if to add refutation to injury — there has of late been a very direct, very simple, and very powerful argument against the PSR, an argument due to Peter van Inwagen and Jonathan Bennett. (More on this argument later.) And, perhaps even worse, there has been the testimony of contemporary physics which, in the eyes of many, tells directly and empirically against the PSR: for isn't it a hallmark of contemporary physics that there can be certain facts without explanation? (I'll have a bit to say about this conflict toward the end of this paper.)

In light of this sorry situation, what's a good rationalist to do?

Don't these multifarious considerations give the rationalist sufficient reason not to embark on any line of thought meant to lead to the PSR? No matter how plausible the starting point of my proposed argument, there is, one might think, just no point in starting. But — here I go again — the starting points are so natural and attractive. What harm can come of looking at them just one more time? Humor me. I just want to start. I know that I can stop at any time, and it would be so nice just to start, just to start...

So start I will, and what could be more innocent than to start simply by forgetting the PSR and focusing on a mundane and extremely

intuitive inference. Thus consider this simple example from Leibniz: “[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.”<sup>4</sup> This certainly seems like a sensible inference. Absent any relevant difference between the sides of the balance, one naturally concludes that the whole will be at rest. Leibniz (or Archimedes) here rejects a certain possibility — viz., that the balance is not at rest — because this possibility would be inexplicable: given the equal weights and the lack of any other relevant difference, there could be no reason for the whole not to be at rest, and so the whole is at rest. I'm not necessarily endorsing this inference but merely pointing out that it is extremely plausible.

This is an example of what I call an explicability argument. In such an argument, a certain state of affairs is said not to obtain simply because its obtaining would be inexplicable, a so-called brute fact. Here the state of affairs rejected because of its inexplicability is the motion of the balance. The Archimedean scenario illustrates the power that explicability arguments can have. It remains to be seen whether such arguments have force more generally. If explicability arguments are legitimate generally, then it follows directly that the PSR is true, for the PSR is simply the rejection of inexplicability in general. But, it seems, one can accept the Archimedean scenario without thereby being committed to the PSR. Perhaps explicability arguments work in some cases but not in others.

Well, let's see. Let's take another extremely plausible example: brute dispositions. Imagine two objects that are in the same world and that are categorically exactly alike. They each have (qualitatively) the same molecular structure and have all the same categorical physical features. If one of these objects has the disposition to dissolve in water, could the other one fail to have that disposition? It would seem

4. Leibniz to Clarke, p. 321, also “Primary Truths”, p. 31, in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*.

not: given their exact categorical similarity, nothing could ground this dispositional difference between the two objects, and so we reject the scenario in which there is such a difference.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, this is an enormously intuitively plausible conclusion. Here we reject brute dispositional differences, differences that would be inexplicable. This is another explicability argument: the state of affairs rejected because of its inexplicability is the one in which the objects have different dispositional properties. Again, this explicability argument does not by itself force us to embrace the PSR, the denial of inexplicability in general. But this case and the previous one can give us pause, for now we wonder just how extensive this embrace of explicability is. There's no cause for alarm just yet, merely a question that we are naturally led to pursue.

Once our eyes are opened to this phenomenon, we can see explicability arguments popping up everywhere. One of my favorite examples of explicability arguments is at work in Derek Parfit's famous discussion of personal identity and fission. Consider a case in which there is a person, *A*, whose brain is cut in half. Each half is placed in a different and new body. Each of the two people thus produced is, let's say, equally (and significantly) psychologically continuous with the original person, *A*. In light of such continuity, which of the later persons, *B* and *C*, is identical to *A*? Parfit thinks — plausibly — that *B* has as much claim to being *A* as *C* does. Parfit then briefly considers the view that one of *B* and *C* and not the other is identical to *A*. But Parfit rejects this view: for, he says, what could make it the case that *B* and not *C* is identical to *A*? It would seem wholly arbitrary that *B* and not *C* is identical to *A*. Nothing could explain why *B* is identical to *A*, and *C* is not.<sup>6</sup> It is — at least in part — for this reason that Parfit rejects this view and says that either both of *B* and *C* are identical to *A* or neither

5. See Theodore Sider, *Four Dimensionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 40. For a good overview of this topic, see Michael Fara, "Dispositions" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (at <http://plato.stanford.edu>).

6. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 239, 240, 242, 256, 259. A similar conclusion would apply in the case of branching amoebas.

is; and Parfit is thus well on his way to his highly unusual conclusion that identity is not what matters in survival.

Let's pause, though, to look at the crucial step. Parfit rejects the view that person *B* is person *A* precisely because such an identity would be inexplicable. This move seems perfectly natural, and it is another instance of an explicability argument. Notice once again, though, that this use of an explicability argument does not by itself commit one to the full-blown PSR, to the denial of brute facts in general. All that is being rejected here — and with great plausibility — is a particular brute fact, a brute fact concerning identity.

Perhaps the most historically important example of an explicability argument is the early modern rejection of explanation by means of Aristotelian substantial or accidental forms. Such forms were introduced — or so the caricature goes — to explain changes in the world. A pan becomes hot, for example, because it acquires the form of heat. Such explanation came to be seen and is still seen by most as bankrupt. To explain something's becoming hot in terms of its acquisition of the form of heat is trivial: in order to explain why the pan becomes hot, we need to appeal to features not so closely tied — as the form of heat is — to the phenomenon to be explained. If explanation of a certain phenomenon by means of such forms were the whole explanation, then this phenomenon would remain inexplicable. Because attempts at explanation by means of forms were not successful, philosophers came to deny that such forms could be the entire story when it comes to explaining change. In this way, we can see that the early modern philosophers who rejected explanation by Aristotelian forms were engaging in an explicability argument. If there were no purportedly explanatory items besides such forms, then the phenomenon in question would remain inexplicable. Therefore, there must be some other explanatory item. Thus — by means of this explicability argument — the groundwork was laid for the rise of mechanistic explanation in science, and nothing in philosophy or science has been the same since then. Once again, notice that this explicability argument does not commit one to the full-blown PSR.

We can also see an endorsement of induction as implicitly an appeal to an explicability argument. In endorsing induction, we presuppose that the future will be like the past or that cases that we have observed are similar to ones we haven't. If the future suddenly veered from the past, if certain features previously associated suddenly came apart without there being any relevant further underlying difference in features, then this sudden lack of association would seem groundless, inexplicable. In affirming, therefore, that the future will be like the past, we are affirming that there will not be such an inexplicable turn of events. Endorsing induction, therefore, can be seen as, at bottom, an appeal to an explicability argument.<sup>7</sup>

Let's turn now to some more controversial explicability arguments, ones that nonetheless have considerable intuitive appeal. A debate is raging in philosophy over the nature of consciousness: does a mental state's being conscious supervene on some more fundamental, perhaps physical or functional, features or is consciousness not grounded in such features? On the former view, whenever consciousness appears, there would be an explanation of its appearance, an explanation that appeals to the more fundamental features on which consciousness supervenes. Thus, on this view, we would have an explanation of why certain mental states are conscious and others are not: the conscious mental states are just those that have the requisite physical or functional features, and the non-conscious mental states are those that lack such features. On the rival view, consciousness is not susceptible to such an explanation: there is nothing more fundamental in virtue of which a mental state is conscious. Consciousness, on this view, is inexplicable.

One may find this inexplicability of consciousness unacceptable and thus demand that there be some deeper feature that can explain consciousness. This concern to avoid inexplicability is, I would argue,

7. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Hume, who — on one reading at least — rejects the legitimacy of inductive arguments also (and more fundamentally) rejects the PSR.

the core motivation behind most forms of physicalism and functionalism in the philosophy of mind. To embrace this line of thought is to give an explicability argument that goes as follows:

If consciousness were not dependent on more fundamental features, then consciousness would be inexplicable.

But consciousness is not inexplicable.

Therefore, consciousness is dependent on more fundamental features.

Notice that in making this kind of explicability argument, one is not committing oneself to a particular account of consciousness, to a certain kind of feature as the supervenience base for consciousness. One is merely committing oneself to there being some kind of account. Typically, of course, those who insist on there being an account have a specific account to offer, which may be more or less plausible (usually pretty implausible). But the status of these specific accounts does not affect the plausibility of the general demand — reflected in the explicability argument I just gave — that there be some account of consciousness.

Causation provides the occasion for another controversial explicability argument that nonetheless enjoys significant support within philosophy. For a reductionist about causation, there must be something in virtue of which a causal relation obtains. Why is it that these events are causally related and those are not? What is it that makes them causally related? To deny that there is any deeper fact that can explain why a causal relation obtains in a given situation is to treat causation as primitive or inexplicable, and such inexplicability does seem rather unpalatable. It would seem odd for causation to be a primitive fact, for there to be nothing one could say in answer to the question: what is it in virtue of which these events are causally related and those not? In the same way, it would seem odd if, in the Parfit case, *A* and *B* were identical (and *A* and *C* were not) even though there

would be nothing in virtue of which this identity holds (and that non-identity doesn't hold). Similarly, brute causation would seem to be as unwelcome as brute dispositions, as the view that one thing is soluble and another thing not despite their exact categorical similarity, and so on for other cases. The reductionist about causation seems to rely on the rejection of inexplicability in this case, just as inexplicability was rejected in the other cases. And my point here — shared by many other philosophers — is that this rejection of the inexplicability of causation does have considerable intuitive appeal.

Notice again that to accept the demand for an explanation is not by itself to put forward a specific account of causation. More important than a specific account is the general demand that causation not be inexplicable. This demand generates the explicability argument in this case. And notice also that accepting this demand does not by itself commit one to the general PSR. Rejecting inexplicability in this case does not by itself require rejecting inexplicability in all cases.

An even more controversial case, but one in which the demand for explanation is still powerful, is that of modality. What is it for a certain proposition to be possible or necessary? If we answer this question by saying (as a standard answer goes) that a necessary proposition is one that is true in all possible worlds, and a possible proposition is one that is true in some possible worlds, then one will not have given a reductive account of modality. This is because one will have accounted for necessity and possibility in terms of the inherently modal notion of a *possible* world. Thus, on this account, modality remains primitive, not explained in terms of some further feature. Many, such as Plantinga, are quite happy to embrace primitive modality, but some are not. They seek an explanation of modality in other terms. Lewis and Sider offer differing accounts (Lewis in terms of existence, Sider in terms of linguistic convention),<sup>8</sup> but each is responding to what is,

8. David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Sider, "Reductive Theories of Modality", in Michael Loux and Dean Zimmerman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 180–208.

I believe, a plausible demand: that there must be something in virtue of which *these* propositions are necessary (or possible, etc.) and *those* propositions are not necessary (or possible, etc.). Such a difference in modal status between propositions would seem to cry out for explanation, just as the differences in the other cases already discussed — differences concerning consciousness, causation, dispositions, being identical to *A* in a case of apparent fission, becoming hot, etc. — cry out for explanation. And my point here is that reductionists about modality are committed to an explicability argument in this case:

If modality is not reduced in some way, then it will be inexplicable.

But modality is not inexplicable.

So modality must be reduced in some way.

And, as I have pointed out in other cases, to accept this demand for explanation is not by itself to accept a particular reductionist account of modality nor is it to be committed to the full-blown PSR. One can, it seems, be committed to explicability in some cases without being committed to the rejection of inexplicability in general.

Even if one recognizes that the explicability argument in the case of modality does not by itself commit one to the PSR, one may nonetheless deny that modality is in need of explanation; one may still be happy to treat modality as primitive. Fair enough, but a natural question arises at this point: given the other cases in which one does accept explicability arguments — *e.g.*, the Parfit case, the Archimedean case, the cases concerning dispositions or causation or consciousness or Aristotelian forms or induction, take your pick — why does one reject the explicability argument in the case of modality, an argument that is structurally the same as the explicability arguments in the other cases? Is there a legitimate reason for not accepting this explicability argument — concerning modality — while one accepts others? Our practice of accepting explicability arguments in some cases puts pressure on us

to accept this explicability argument or to find a principled reason for rejecting it. Without providing such a principled difference between the case of modality and the others, I think one should feel bad about rejecting this explicability argument while accepting some others. To insist on such a principled difference is, obviously, not to presuppose the full-blown PSR; rather, it is simply yet another plausible and local appeal to explicability. The apparent illegitimacy of the explicability argument concerning modality despite the legitimacy of other explicability arguments would seem to be inexplicable itself and problematically so. Of course, one can say that this explicability argument — concerning modality — is not acceptable, and the other ones are, and there is no reason why this should be so. On this view, the line between acceptable and unacceptable explicability arguments is itself arbitrary or a brute fact. This response, though perhaps unpalatable, begs no questions at this stage because — as I have been at pains to point out — no one has yet argued for the general claim that there are no brute facts. Thus, at this point, it may not be illegitimate to appeal to a brute fact to halt the slide from accepting some explicability arguments to accepting all such arguments and thus the PSR itself.

However, there is one further explicability argument that I want to consider, an argument that, unlike the others, does directly entail and amount to an argument for the PSR. This argument, unlike the previous ones, can't be legitimately — *i.e.*, non-question-beggingly — dismissed by appealing to an arbitrary, inexplicable line between legitimate and illegitimate explicability arguments.

Let's turn, then, to the final case, that of existence. Just as we may (or may not) demand an account of what consciousness is, what causation is, what modality is, just as we may (less contentiously) demand an account of the identity of *A* and *B* in the Parfit case (if indeed they are identical), an account of the motion of the balance in the Archimedean case, an account of what it is in virtue of which things have the dispositions they do; so too it can come to seem natural to demand an account of existence, of what it is for a thing to exist. What is it in virtue of which things that exist enjoy existence? What explains why the

things that exist, exist? Just as, when we have a case of causation, we might ask what explains why this case is a case of causation, what is it in virtue of which there is a causal relation here, so too it seems natural to ask: what explains why this case is a case of existence? What is it in virtue of which this thing exists? In the same way, just as the consciousness of a given mental state must be explicable, so too, perhaps, the existence of a given thing must be explicable. We must have an account of what it is in virtue of which that thing exists, just as we must have an account of what it is in virtue of which a given mental state is conscious. If we take this path, then we advance an explicability argument: the existence of each thing that exists must be explicable, just as the consciousness of each conscious mental state must be explicable, and so on for the other cases. Exactly what the account of existence is, is a separate issue, one that we need not resolve here.<sup>9</sup> The point so far, however, is just that the more or less uncontroversial use of explicability arguments in these other cases can make it seem natural to advance an explicability argument in the case of existence. In other words, the use of explicability arguments in these other cases puts pressure on us to accept an explicability argument in the case of existence — unless, of course, one can draw a line between this explicability argument and others.<sup>10</sup> As in the case of modality, to insist on such a principled difference is not to presuppose the full-blown PSR; rather it is simply yet another plausible and local appeal to explicability.

And the need to draw a line is urgent because the explicability argument in the case of existence differs from the previous ones in one crucial respect: while the other explicability arguments do not by themselves commit one to the full-blown PSR, the explicability argument concerning existence does, for to insist that there be an explanation

9. I offer a specific account in "A Rationalist Manifesto: Spinoza and the Principle of Sufficient Reason", *Philosophical Topics* 31 (2003): 75–93. But I don't want to muddy the waters here by wading into such controversies.
10. Similarly, if we focus on truths instead of things or states of affairs, we can say that we need *either* to provide an account of what it is in virtue of which each truth is true *or* to draw a line between the explicability argument concerning truth and other explicability arguments.

for the existence of each existing thing is simply to insist on the PSR itself, as I stated it at the outset of this paper.<sup>11</sup> So the explicability argument concerning existence, unlike the other explicability arguments, is an argument for the PSR itself, and it is our willingness to accept explicability arguments in other, similar cases that puts pressure on us to accept the explicability argument in the case of existence, *i.e.*, puts pressure on us to accept the PSR itself.

In light of this sorry situation, what's a good non-rationalist to do?

When faced with this series of explicability arguments, the last of which is an argument for the PSR, one has three options:

- (1) One can say that some of the explicability arguments are legitimate and some—in particular, the explicability argument concerning existence—are not.
- (2) One can say that none of the explicability arguments is legitimate.
- (3) One can say that all of the explicability arguments, including the explicability argument concerning existence, are legitimate.

Now, (3) is clearly not an option for the non-rationalist, *i.e.*, for the opponent of the PSR, because (3) commits one to the explicability argument concerning existence and thus commits one to the PSR. (2) is an option for the non-rationalist, but not a very attractive one. To reject all explicability arguments is, *inter alia*, to reject Parfit's argument that, in the fission case, *A* is not identical to *B*; is to reject Archimedes' argument that the balance cannot move; is to accept the possibility of brute dispositions; is to reject the legitimacy of inductive inferences generally; etc. While adopting this position that rejects all explicability

11. Alternatively, to insist that there be an explanation of the truth of each truth is simply to insist on the PSR itself. I will not continue to give the alternative formulations in terms of truth.

arguments may not be logically incoherent, doing so is intuitively extremely problematic.

A more sophisticated version of (2) would include more than a bare denial of the legitimacy of explicability arguments. According to one such version—we'll see another later—in at least some of the cases, the relevant intuition is not exactly that a certain phenomenon must be explicable, but rather that either the phenomenon is explicable in a particular way, *i.e.*, in terms of a particular deeper feature, or if not, the phenomenon is inexplicable.

However, this response doesn't seem to capture the intuitions in at least some of the cases. In the Parfit case, the intuition is that the identity of *A* and *B* in that situation must be explicable in terms of some further feature; no particular further feature is the object of our intuition. Similarly, in the dispositions case, the intuition seems to be that the disposition must be explained somehow in terms of other, non-dispositional, *i.e.*, categorical, features. Our intuitions here need not specify what the non-dispositional explaining feature is. Arguably, this is also true of the urge to reduce modality and causality: the urge is, at bottom, an urge to reduce the troubling feature (modality or causality) to something, anything, less troubling. What's guiding us here is the intuition that a phenomenon must be explicable, not that it must be explicable in a certain way.<sup>12</sup> So this, more sophisticated version of (2) does not work. Consider now how (1) might fare as an option for the non-rationalist.

According to (1), there is a line between acceptable and unacceptable explicability arguments, a line that leaves the explicability argument concerning existence on the unacceptable side. How might the non-rationalist draw this line?

First, it is crucial to see that the non-rationalist must draw the line in a principled, non-arbitrary way. This is because the argument the non-rationalist is attempting to rebut is the explicability argument concerning existence, *i.e.*, an argument for the PSR itself. In this dialectical

12. On this point in the case of modality, see Sider, "Reductive Theories of Modality", p. 184.

context—in which the truth or falsity of the PSR is the very point at issue—the non-rationalist is not entitled to rely on the claim that it is legitimate for her to draw an arbitrary, unprincipled line between the explicability argument concerning existence and at least some other explicability arguments. To appeal to an arbitrary line is to appeal to a brute fact—the alleged fact that there is no explanation as to why the line between legitimate and illegitimate explicability arguments is to be drawn here: it just is drawn here. In appealing to a brute fact, the non-rationalist may seem to be remaining true to her position, which of course tolerates brute facts. However, to appeal to a brute fact in this dialectical context is simply to presuppose that the PSR is false, and this is the one thing that a non-rationalist may not do here. Thus we can see that while the explicability argument concerning modality can, perhaps, coherently be avoided by drawing an arbitrary line between explicability arguments, the explicability argument concerning existence—precisely because it is an argument for the PSR itself—cannot be avoided this way.

So if the non-rationalist is to draw the kind of line she needs to draw between acceptable and unacceptable explicability arguments, she must do so in a principled way, *i.e.*, she must give us a reason for thinking that other—at least some other—explicability arguments are legitimate, but that the explicability argument concerning existence is not. Unless the non-rationalist can draw this principled line, she will have no way of legitimately responding to the explicability argument concerning existence and thus no way of legitimately responding to the argument for the PSR.

I suspect that many of you simply will not see the force of the challenge that I am issuing to the non-rationalist. (I speak here from long experience, experience that prompted me to call my endeavor here quixotic.) Philosophers tend to be pretty cavalier in their use of explicability arguments—using them when doing so suits their purposes, refusing to use them otherwise, and more generally, failing to investigate how their various attitudes toward explicability arguments hang together, if they hang together at all. We philosophers—in our

slouching fashion!—are comfortable with a certain degree of unexamined arbitrariness in our use of explicability arguments. But my point is that a broader perspective on our practices with regard to explicability arguments reveals that there is a genuine tension in the prevalent willingness to use some explicability arguments and to reject others.

One may try to put a pleasing face on this widespread insouciance, this denial of any tension here, by simply labeling the disparate treatment of certain explicability arguments as a deliverance of intuition. One might claim—and notice I say “claim” and not “argue”—that no ground is needed for the rejection of the explicability argument concerning existence and for the acceptance of some others, because one can appeal to one’s intuitions here. One can just see—intuitively—that explanation is needed in the other cases but is not needed in the case of existence. We are intuitively justified in treating existence as primitive (Lewis seems happy to do so), even if we are not justified in accepting the primitives that some of the other explicability arguments seek to avoid.

However, this appeal to intuition is simply question-begging. And this is because the apparent intuition that existence is not in need of explanation has been challenged. It’s been called into doubt by the very considerations I have raised concerning our endorsement of explicability arguments elsewhere. The embrace of these other explicability arguments is enough to get us to take seriously the possibility that explicability should be insisted on in the case of existence too. In this light, reason has been given to question the intuition—if ever we had it—that existence is not in need of explanation. Such reasons for doubt will remain in force until a positive reason is given for treating existence differently, for treating existence as not in need of explanation unlike some of the other cases in which explicability arguments are accepted.

I want to stress that in arguing that the appeal to intuition to draw a line between good and bad explicability arguments is ineffectual, I am not arguing that relying on intuition is in itself illegitimate. Indeed, I have relied on intuition myself in displaying the legitimacy of certain

explicability arguments. No, I don't have a problem with employing intuitions. What I do have a problem with is failing to take seriously challenges to certain intuitions, challenges raised by our intuitive commitments to certain other theses. The challenge I raise to certain intuitions is an internal challenge, one that comes from within the domain of our intuitions.

A strategy even more desperate than distinguishing between good and bad explicability arguments on the basis of intuitions about the legitimacy of particular explicability arguments is simply to refuse to take up the broader point of view from which one can compare the different explicability arguments and ask why some are legitimate and others not. Such a refusal seems thoroughly unmotivated: what could legitimately prevent us from considering these cases in light of one another? Such a refusal seems tantamount to ignoring the problem. And, of course, we can't make the problem go away by simply ignoring it.

Nor can we make it go away by appealing to intuitively problematic implications of the PSR. Thus, consider the argument against the PSR advanced by van Inwagen and Bennett that I alluded to earlier. They argue that the PSR entails necessitarianism, the view that all truths are necessary truths. (The details of the argument are not relevant here, so I sketch them in a footnote.<sup>13</sup>) I tend to think van Inwagen and Bennett

13. Assume for the purposes of a reductio that the PSR is true and that there are contingent truths, *i.e.*, that necessitarianism is false. Now consider the conjunction, *P*, of all contingent truths. As a conjunction of contingent truths, *P* itself must be contingent. (No necessarily true proposition can have any contingent conjuncts.) Given the PSR, there must be an explanation, a sufficient reason, for *P*. Call this explanation '*R*'. Now *R* must be either necessary or contingent. If *R* is necessary, then if *R* is sufficient for *P*, *P* will itself be necessary and so all the conjuncts of *P* will be necessary. But this would be contrary to our assumption that there are contingent truths and that *P* is the conjunction of them. So *R* must itself be contingent. But if *R* is contingent, then it is a conjunct in *P* (after all, *P* is a conjunction of all contingent truths.) *R*, then, as the sufficient reason for *P* would also be the sufficient reason for *R* itself. Thus, the contingent proposition, *R*, would be a sufficient reason for itself. But how could a contingent proposition be a sufficient reason for itself? Van Inwagen and Bennett assume that a contingent proposition cannot be a sufficient reason for itself. On this assumption — which I am willing to go along with here — it follows that *R*, the reason for the conjunction of all contingent

are right that the PSR entails necessitarianism. Now necessitarianism is, of course, extremely implausible — it entails, *e.g.*, that it is absolutely impossible that I wore a red shirt today instead of a blue one, etc. It might be thought that, because necessitarianism is so implausible, the entailment of necessitarianism by the PSR gives the opponent of the PSR a way to draw a principled line between good and bad explicability arguments: the good arguments don't imply necessitarianism, the bad arguments — including the explicability argument concerning existence — do. So have we at last found a legitimate basis for distinguishing explicability arguments?

We have not. I've already argued that the intuitive acceptability of explicability arguments in some cases generates intuitive pressure to accept the PSR and the explicability argument concerning existence, and that this intuitive pressure renders ineffectual, in this context, the appeal to the apparent intuition that the explicability argument concerning existence is unacceptable. In the same way, this intuitive pressure from good explicability arguments renders ineffectual, in this context, the appeal to the intuition that necessitarianism is false. Precisely because necessitarianism is an implication of the PSR, the intuitive pressure leading to the PSR is intuitive pressure leading to necessitarianism. A clear-headed proponent of the PSR can be expected to embrace necessitarianism for precisely this reason. (Spinoza certainly did.) "Oh, that necessitarianism stuff is something I knew about all along," the rationalist might say. So in a context in which an intuitive argument has been mounted for the PSR and, in effect, for necessitarianism, to invoke the denial of necessitarianism as an

---

truths, cannot be contingent. But we have already seen that it cannot be necessary either. It follows that there can be no reason for the conjunction of all contingent truths. Thus to preserve the PSR, it must be the case that there is no conjunction of all contingent truths, and this — as Bennett and van Inwagen argue — could be the case only if there are no contingent truths, *i.e.*, only if necessitarianism is true. So the only way for the PSR to be true is if necessitarianism is true. Thus the PSR entails 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.)

argument against the PSR, and for a line between explicability arguments, is as effective as invoking, in this context, the denial of the PSR as an argument against the PSR. The appeal to the PSR's implication of necessitarianism as ruling out the PSR and as enabling us to draw a principled line between good and bad explicability arguments is thus question-begging.

Perhaps at this point you are prompted to say: "Hey, wait a minute. I grant that it would be nice to draw a principled line between acceptable and unacceptable explicability arguments. I'm as much in favor of principled lines as the next philosopher," you magnanimously say. "And if we are unable to find a principled line in this case, that would be a genuine cost. But this cost is far outweighed by the cost of accepting the PSR and necessitarianism. So, on balance, we should deny the PSR and pay the price of not having a principled line between acceptable and unacceptable explicability arguments."

In a different setting, this kind of position may be quite reasonable. But the above response is wrong to suggest that the key point is simply that denying the PSR for no principled reason involves a cost that we can willingly incur, a cost that is a nuisance perhaps, but no more. No, in this context, in which an argument for the PSR has already been mounted, an argument with intuitive appeal stemming from clearly acceptable explicability arguments, the cost of not having a principled line between acceptable and unacceptable explicability arguments is no mere philosophical inconvenience; rather the cost is that one has no non-question-begging response to an argument for the PSR that has been offered on intuitive grounds. Question-beggingness is not a bullet one can willingly bite in order to respond to an argument in favor of one's opponent's position. Rather, to beg the question is simply to have no response at all, to have no way of defending oneself against one's opponent.

Here we can see the significance of my having gone to the trouble to devise an argument for the PSR, one that is grounded in certain extremely plausible claims about particular explicability arguments. Van Inwagen and Bennett's argument may be a good way to point out a

seemingly untoward implication of the PSR. If one had no independent argument for the PSR, van Inwagen and Bennett's argument might be enough to send the PSR to the dustbin. But given that there is an independent argument for the PSR—the one I have offered—matters are no longer straightforward. Indeed, my intuition-based argument for the PSR is as much an argument for necessitarianism as for the PSR, so van Inwagen and Bennett's argument against the PSR from the bare denial of necessitarianism must obviously be powerless against my argument.

Van Inwagen and Bennett's argument—however otherwise attractive—distracts us from what should be the main philosophical goal here: trying to find a principled way of drawing the line between good and bad explicability arguments. Similarly, I would say that focusing on the apparently anti-PSR implications of quantum mechanics fails to address the crucial philosophical issue. Yes, the PSR may or may not be able to be reconciled with quantum mechanics. There is a lively debate on this topic, which I can't presume to weigh in on.<sup>14</sup> But that debate—however it goes—seems to leave untouched the central philosophical issue here: viz., determining whether there is a principled line between explicability arguments, and if so, what it is. And, again, if there is no such line, then the argument for the PSR that I have offered may not be able to be avoided.

That one needs to have such a principled line enables me not only to respond to van Inwagen and Bennett, but also to mount a response to another subtle version of (2), *i.e.*, of the claim that no explicability argument is legitimate. On this view, the conclusions of some or even most explicability arguments are true, *i.e.*, there are no brute dispositions, *A* is not identical to *B* in the Parfit case, etc. But—so this view goes—the notion of explicability doesn't do any work in reaching these conclusions. Rather, the conclusions are accepted because they cohere better with our commitments in general and have no major untoward consequences. By contrast—so the proponent of this strategy

14. For a helpful discussion, see Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 160–70.

argues—the conclusion of the explicability argument concerning existence, viz., that existence itself is explicable, does not cohere with our overall commitments and does have significant untoward consequences. The conclusions of some of the explicability arguments other than the argument that concerns existence are accepted, not because one is antecedently committed to the explicability of a certain fact or feature, but because those conclusions don't conflict with our overall views. By contrast, on this view, the conclusion of the explicability argument concerning existence is rejected because it does not cohere with our overall views. Because this view sees explicability as not guiding our conclusions and does not see us as antecedently committed to explicability in any particular case, this view can be seen as a version of (2): while the conclusions of some explicability arguments may be acceptable, the explicability arguments themselves are not legitimate.

For this response to my position to work, an exceptionally strong claim is needed: explicability by itself provides no reason for the conclusion that *A* is not identical to *B* in the Parfit case, that there are no brute dispositions, etc. For if explicability did provide such a reason, then there would be analogous reason for the conclusion in the case of existence, viz., that existence must be explained in terms of some deeper feature. But if there is such reason, then there is, as I have pointed out, reason for the PSR, *i.e.*, there is an argument for the PSR. Given that there is such an argument, one would again need to reject the argument in a non-question-begging way. But, as we've seen, this may not be able to be done. To respond to my argument for the PSR—once this argument gets started—one may have no choice but to appeal to the denial of the PSR, *i.e.*, one may have no choice but to beg the question. And, once again, this is not a satisfactory position to be in. So according to this response to me, that is, according to this subtle version of (2), the consideration of explicability by itself provides no reason for the conclusions in the case of the “good” explicability arguments.

But this certainly seems not to be right. The conclusion that (in the Parfit case) *A* is identical to *B* seems wrong, and at least one of the

reasons it does so is that the identity of *A* and *B* would be an intolerably brute fact. It is this reason that shows that explicability is doing at least some of the philosophical heavy lifting in such cases. As long as explicability is doing some of the heavy lifting, my argument against the PSR can get off the ground, and the need to respond to it in a non-question-begging way becomes urgent. The moral once again is that one can't let my argument for the PSR get off the ground: if it does, then one will need to be able to respond to it in a non-question-begging way, that is, one will need to draw a principled line between explicability arguments. And this is precisely what we have not yet been able to do.

Yet you might think that if this is the central issue, then the opponent of the PSR is home free. For we know from analogously troubling cases that there is no real pressure to accept the extreme position on one side of a yet-to-be-drawn line. Thus take the following argument: Joe is bald. If *x* is bald and if *y* has only one more hair than *x*, then *y* is bald. Thus someone with only one more hair than Joe is bald. This style of reasoning can be iterated indefinitely until we reach the absurd conclusion that hairy Fabio is bald. Now even if we do not know how to stop the slide to the absurd conclusion, *i.e.*, even if we don't yet have a principled way to draw the line between the case of Joe and the case of Fabio, we know that there is something wrong with the above argument, for Fabio is obviously not bald. Similarly, it might be thought, prior to finding a principled line between explicability arguments, we know that there is something wrong with the argument leading to the PSR, because the PSR is simply unacceptable. So just as there is no genuine pressure to conclude that Fabio is bald, there is no genuine pressure to conclude that the PSR is true. Or, to put the point another way, if my argument earlier in the paper puts pressure on us to accept the PSR, then the argument concerning baldness puts pressure on us to accept that Fabio is bald. But since there is no real pressure to accept that Fabio is bald, there is no real pressure to accept the PSR.

However, the line of thought in the previous paragraph neglects a crucial disanalogy between the two cases. In the baldness case,

whether or not there is a principled line between Joe and Fabio doesn't really matter because, if need be, we can always draw an unprincipled, arbitrary line. Drawing an unprincipled line begs no questions in this context, one in which the PSR itself is not the very point in question. Because we know we can always draw an unprincipled line here, we know that we won't be forced to say that Fabio is bald if we don't want to. For this reason, even without a principled line, there is no genuine pressure to accept that Fabio is bald. But drawing an unprincipled line is precisely an option we don't have in the PSR case. For, as we've seen, to draw an unprincipled line on behalf of the opponent of the PSR is to beg the question against the proponent of the PSR. So unless we find a principled basis for drawing a line between explicability arguments, there is genuine pressure on us to accept the PSR. Once again, we can see the significance of my having given an argument for the PSR: it is this argument that generates the relevant disanalogy between the baldness case and the PSR case and that makes the job of finding a principled line between explicability arguments extremely urgent.

Let me take one last stab at drawing this kind of line. In at least some of the other explicability arguments, there is a contrast between two similar things, a contrast that seems objectionably brute. Thus in the Archimedean case, there is a contrast between the two sides of the balance, one of which goes down and the other does not. In the case of the dispositions, there are two categorically identical objects that nonetheless differ dispositionally. In the case of causation, there are two sequences of events, one of which is a causal sequence and the other is not, yet there is no further difference between the sequences that can ground this causal difference. These cases of contrasting pairs helped to generate the relevant explicability arguments. Notice that in these cases, each member of the contrasting pairs is supposed to be given, to exist. The two sides of the balance exist, the two categorically identical objects exist, the two sequences of events exist. But in the case of the explicability argument concerning existence, the contrast is between two things one of which exists and one of which does not.

Thus we might ask: in virtue of what do horses exist whereas unicorns do not? The fact that the contrast in the case of the explicability argument concerning existence is not between two existing things while the contrast in the other explicability arguments is between two existing things might be thought to generate a relevant disanalogy between the explicability argument concerning existence and the other explicability arguments.

But I can't see why this should be so. For example, the explicability problem concerning causation would seem just as acute if we considered two sequences, one existing and one not, or even if we considered two non-existing sequences. The Archimedean case may seem to require that both sides of the balance exist in order for the problem to arise. Certainly the problem in this case cannot be generated with one side of the balance existing and the other side merely possible. But the problem can get going if we think of the two sides as merely possible and as not existing. So, in at least some of the previous cases where there is a contrast between two things that generates a problem with explicability, the contrast need not be seen as holding between two existing things.

In this light, it is no longer clear why considering non-existing objects should render explicability arguments problematic. That is, it is no longer clear why the fact that the contrast invoked in the explicability argument concerning existence does not involve two existing things should be relevant and should lead us to say that the explicability argument concerning existence is not legitimate. Thus, this difference between the explicability argument concerning existence and some other explicability arguments does not seem to be the principled difference we are looking for.

I have shown why some potential ways of drawing the line won't work. And I must admit that I am not optimistic that such a line can be found. In other words, I am all out of stabs. I am inclined, for that reason, to think that our acceptance of explicability arguments in certain relatively uncontroversial cases commits us to the PSR. Of course, I

have not shown that there's no legitimate way of drawing the line that needs to be drawn. Perhaps there is such a line. But until we find one, we have powerful and un-rebutted reason to accept the PSR.

One can see my argument as highlighting an important dialectical advantage that our imagined rationalist (*i.e.*, me) has over our imagined non-rationalist (*i.e.*, you). I have been arguing that the non-rationalist who accepts some explicability arguments has no non-question-begging way to avoid the rationalist position, *i.e.*, no non-question-begging way to avoid the PSR. By contrast, the rationalist who accepts the necessitarian implication of the PSR is not under any pressure, as far as I can see, to accept the non-rationalist position, *i.e.*, to deny the PSR. In this way, the rationalist position is internally coherent in a way that the position of the non-rationalist who accepts some explicability arguments is not. And, of course, an internally incoherent position is worse off than an internally coherent one. So, again, we have powerful and un-rebutted reason to accept the PSR, a principle that most of us have been taught to scorn.

I told you not to let me start.<sup>15</sup>

15. Versions of this paper were presented at the University of Vermont, the University of Virginia, Humboldt University, Berlin, and at several venues at Yale. Many thanks to all who participated in those lively discussions. Thanks also and especially to Shelly Kagan, Keith DeRose, Ted Sider, Gaurav Vazirani, Ken Winkler, Kati Balog, Troy Cross, George Bealer, Zoltan Szabo, Leslie Wolf, Omri Boehm, Sam Newlands, Jim Kreines, Larry Jorgensen, Debra Nails, Dominik Perler, Yitzhak Melamed, Tyler Doggett, Martin Lin, Jim Cargile, Carol Rovane, and several anonymous referees.