

Sufficient Reason and Infinite Regress:
Causal Consistency in Descartes and Spinoza

Ryan Steed

PHIL 2112

Professor Rebecca Car

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While both Baruch Spinoza and René Descartes espouse geometric truth and fastidious deduction to establish truth, I argue that Spinoza's proof of God and substance is closer to the rational ideal on the grounds that he is more consistent in his definition and application of causal relations between things. To do so, I frame each philosophers' set of axioms as a variant of the Principal of Sufficient Reason (PSR), a foundational principle of relations. First, I will briefly review the PSR and its variable components. Next, I will examine Descartes' treatment of causality in light of the PSR, finding that his definition of sufficient reason fluctuates in the course of his argument and that he stops short of the full consequences of his postulates. With Descartes' inconsistencies as a guide, I will then examine Spinoza's reflexive axioms with respect to the PSR and conclude that his resolution of infinite regress is more thorough and rational, notwithstanding the restrictions it places on his conception of God.

The epistemological and ontological differences examined here may be conveniently categorized as one of two kinds of variations on the basic PSR. The Principal of Sufficient Reason states quite simply that for any given tautology p , there must be a sufficient reason why p is true. Stated in discrete terms, where the relation R is defined such that $y R x$ indicates that y is the sufficient reason for x :

Principal of Sufficient Reason: $(\forall x)(\exists y)(y R x)$

I argue that both authors attempt to establish the intelligibility of all or many things by relating them through the PSR; all that remains to be examined is the criterion of the sufficient reason relation R and the set of elements to which it applies.

In his trademark proof of God, Descartes adheres closely to the PSR with respect to the reality of things:¹

¹ Meditations, 49.

Now it is indeed evident by the light of nature that there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause. For whence, I ask, could an effect get its reality, if not from its cause? Hence it follows that something cannot come into being out of nothing...

All effects – that is, all things – must have sufficient, or adequate, cause. Mathematically, $y R x$ if y has as much reality as x . This relation not only holds between formal things, but also between ideas: "... this is manifestly true not merely for those effects whose reality is actual or formal, but also for ideas in which only objective reality is considered."² Descartes equates the formal reality of a cause to the objective reality of an idea in the same proportion. He dubs this amount of reality (formal or objective) the relative "perfection" of a thing.³

I discern two major discrepancies with this version of the PSR. The first lies in Descartes manipulation of the definition of perfection, and thereby the very definition of the causal relationship R . Descartes clarifies his ambiguous reference to the degrees of reality in third objections:⁴ "... if there is an infinite and independent substance, it is a thing to a greater degree than is a finite and dependent substance." Descartes supposes that perfection has a maximum, an infinite and independent substance. This point is crucial to his trademark argument for God.⁵ Yet while dispelling the notion of an evil genius and removing all doubt in the intelligibility of external bodies in Meditation Four, Descartes abandons the question of finitude entirely. The term "perfection" comes to refer to qualities that are not defects; perfection connotes an ethical

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Objections and Replies, 81.

⁵ In short, that if all ideas must have sufficient cause with as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality, and I have the idea of a most perfect being, then there must exist formally a most perfect being. The only thing with a sufficient degree of reality is an infinite and independent substance which formally exists.

scale, rather than the ontological one Descartes describes in Meditation Three. This passage ostensibly associates the term perfection with moral goodness or strength:

To begin with, I acknowledge that it is impossible for God ever to deceive me, for trickery or deception are always indicative of some imperfection... the will to deceive undoubtedly attest to maliciousness or weakness. Accordingly, deception is incompatible with God.⁶

Descartes may claim that this sort of ethical perfection is a separate attribute of God, but the trademark proof in Meditation Three necessitates no such attribute. The original PSR requires only sufficient reason – that is, a sufficient degree of reality. It follows that Descartes’ proof of external bodies, which relies on the benevolence of God insofar as he does not manipulate judgment or mathematical truth, relies on a definition of God that is unnecessary to his existence. Descartes therefore cannot claim on these grounds that the existence of God implies the existence of all bodies.

The second discrepancy also regards Descartes’ reliance on God to ensure mathematical truths. It is clear from Descartes’ language in Meditation Four that God is a being with a free and independent *will* which is “incomparably greater in God than it is in [Descartes himself].”⁷ For instance, “God always wills what is best” and “does not wish to deceive.”⁸ But even if God’s will is the cause of all intelligible things, including mathematical truths and the faculty to judge, the unrestricted PSR requires that God’s will must also have a sufficient cause. In Descartes’ own words, “something cannot come into being out of nothing.”⁹ By assuming the freedom and

⁶ Meditations, 54.

⁷ Meditations, 56.

⁸ Meditations, 64.

⁹ Meditations, 49.

agency of God's will, Descartes violates the PSR used to prove his existence. Instead, divine will must be taken as an inexplicable truth, as Descartes himself admits: "It is not without rashness that I think myself capable of inquiring into the ends of God."¹⁰ Thus Descartes allows an arbitrary, brute truth into his epistemology.

Spinoza, on the other hand, successfully avoids contingent truths and maintains a much more consistent definition of the sufficient reason relation. I will describe Spinoza's improvements on the PSR in terms of three variations: first, the basic definition of the relation R and its improved consistency and applicability; second, the reflexivity of R ; third, an infinite regress which separates the relation R between finite things and with regards to God.

Spinoza's PSR is clearly stated in 1a3 and clarified in 1a4: "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of a cause."¹¹ Thus the relation R is some epistemological dependence which Spinoza also expresses as "understanding through," "conception through," and stipulates some sort of commonality between x and y .¹² While Descartes uses an inconsistent scale of perfection to determine sufficient reason, Spinoza deliberately avoids the ethical or aesthetic attributions Descartes embraces, saying, "I do not attribute to Nature [God] beauty, ugliness, order, or confusion."¹³ Additionally, Spinoza's broader definition of sufficient reason allows him the freedom to apply the PSR to the *non*-existence of things. Spinoza leverages this freedom to provide an alternate *a priori* proof of God: "if there can be no reason or cause which prevents God from existing or which annuls his existence, we are bound to conclude that he necessarily exists."¹⁴

¹⁰ Meditations, 55.

¹¹ Ethics 1a4.

¹² Ethics 1a5, 1a2, 1p3.

¹³ Letter to Henry Oldenburg (November 20, 1665), p. 142.

¹⁴ Ethics, 1p11, second proof.

To solve the problem of contingent truths, Spinoza's second variation establishes reflexive causation in his very first definition.¹⁵ 1a2 states it in terms of the PSR: "That which cannot be conceived through another thing must be conceived through itself."¹⁶ By allowing self-causal relations for substances, Spinoza ensures that no cause is needed for God or God's will. Rather, God may be understood through himself. 1p17 clearly states that "God acts solely from the laws of his own nature, constrained by none."¹⁷ Further, Spinoza explicitly proves in 1p29 that "nothing in nature is contingent," especially God.¹⁸ Spinoza's proof for God's self-sufficiency relies on his earlier proofs describing God's infinite nature, which in turn relies on the definition of God. Not only does Spinoza deny that God is contingent on an arbitrary will, he readily denies "absolute, or free, will" or the "faculty of willing and non-willing" to the mind in general.¹⁹ Thus Spinoza maintains the legitimacy of the PSR for all elements in his ontology, including the first efficient cause, and avoids contingent truth.

The last fundamental difference I observe from Descartes' causal relation is Spinoza's insistence on the immanence of God as first cause. Descartes prohibits the infinite regress of caused ideas, favoring a transitive approach to the first cause which relates any given thing to God in linear fashion:²⁰

Although one idea can perhaps issue from another, nevertheless no infinite regress is permitted here; eventually some first idea must be reached whose cause is a sort of archetype that contains formally all the reality that is in the idea merely objectively.

¹⁵ Ethics, 1d1.

¹⁶ Ethics, 1a2.

¹⁷ Ethics, 1p17.

¹⁸ Ethics, 1p29.

¹⁹ Ethics, 1p48-49.

²⁰ Meditations, 50.

Spinoza, on the other hand, repeatedly stresses the direct relation between God and all things: “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.”²¹ Moreover, “every idea of any body or particular thing existing in actuality necessarily involves the eternal and infinite essence of God.”²² But because Spinoza ontologically distinguishes the existence of finite and determinate things from the infinite and eternal, it is simultaneously true that all *finite* things must have *finite* causes in the modes of God’s *infinite* attributes.²³ As such, a finite thing simultaneously belongs to an infinite regress of finite causes with no hypothesis or contingent resolution and to a proximate causal relation with God. There exists an endless chain of finite causes and effects with no beginning or end, but because this chain is composed of finite things it is contingent on God for its existence. This quirk of Spinoza’s ontology finds a resolution in his epistemological PSR only through the permission of the infinite regress of finite things.

In summary, Spinoza manages to explain the infinite regress of finite causes with God, and grounds the infinite regress of infinite causes by allowing *R* to be reflexive with respect to substances. He avoids the complications of degrees of perfection with a clearly defined epistemological *R*, applies that relation to more reliably prove the existence of God *a priori*, and dances around ontological conflicts by permitting infinite regress of finite causes only. Descartes falls further short of the rational ideal, consigning God’s will to the unintelligible and muddling the trademark proof with an ambiguous *R*. Thus Spinoza’s variant of the PSR, the causal proof of God, and epistemology as a whole is a much better effort to arrive at an intelligible world by reason.

²¹ Ethics, 1p18.

²² Ethics, 2p45.

²³ Ethics, 1p28

Bibliography

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