

“Leibniz, in his writings, spread out such an abundance of seminal thoughts that there is hardly another philosopher who can be compared with him in this respect. A portion of these ideas were worked out even in his own day, and with his collaboration; another portion were forgotten but were later rediscovered and further developed. This justifies the expectation that in his works there is still a great deal that now appears dead and buried but that will eventually enjoy its resurrection.”<sup>1</sup>

- Gottlob Frege

“The principle of sufficient reason had been formulated long before Leibnitz.”<sup>2</sup>

- Reginald Garrigou Lagrange

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The idea that “out of nothing, nothing comes” can appear as a commonplace idea. It does so in a context in which something is known to have a cause, but the issue is the identity of the cause. The idea is used to brush aside the nothing as the identity of the cause. But philosophers have used the idea for a more profound idea, viz., that whatever exists has a reason for its existence. This more profound idea is the idea implied in Leibniz’s question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” It is to defending this more profound way of taking “out of nothing, nothing comes” that this thesis is devoted.

That things do not come into being from nothing is a metaphysical intuition that we all use and rely upon nearly every moment of our lives. Common experience tells us all that things just do not pop into existence out of nothing. It takes work and effort to make things happen. Buildings are made by builders, diseases are the result of germs, headaches come from sinus pressure, plane crashes occur when there is some major malfunction, bumps occur in the middle of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Gottlob Frege, ed. H. Hermes, F. Kambartel, and F. Kaulbach, *Nachgelassene Schriften* (Hamburg, 1969), page 9.

<sup>2</sup> Reginald Garrigou Lagrange, tr. Patrick Cummins, *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought* (St Louis: B. Herder Books, 1950), page 34.

night because of the wind blowing a shutter, an alley cat knocking over a trash can, or a burglar attempting a break-in.

In a well-known passage, Aristotle once described the philosophical enterprise as a search for causes and explanations in hopes to satisfy a natural human desire to know.<sup>3</sup> Philosophy begins in wonder, wanting to know an answer to some question, “Why?” We can see the truth behind the Stagarite’s description evinced throughout the history of philosophy. The pre-Socratics sought an explanation as to the ultimate “stuff” of which everything is made. Socrates used the *elenchos* in efforts to arrive at an “account” or *logos* of some concept under discussion. Plato posited the existence of abstract objects to ground the continuity of knowledge. Aristotle himself posited the existence of form, matter, and privation as principles that must exist in order to give an account of physical change. The medieval scholastics made arguments that moved from observed acts, to a power that is able to do those acts, to a nature that serves as a principle behind those powers... And so the story goes.

A similar motivation and procedure could be said for the various sciences. It is easy to arrive at clear examples. Forensic scientists, arson investigators, plane crash investigators, cancer research, nutritional experts, etc., are part of our everyday common experience. They seek to provide us with reasons or *causes* as to *why* the person died, *why* the building caught fire, *why* the plane crashed, *what* causes cancer, *what* made me overweight, etc. After all, it is supposed, it has to be *something*.

---

<sup>3</sup>“Wisdom is knowledge about certain causes and principles.” Aristotle, *Meta* I 982a1, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* vol. II, ed. Jonathan Barnes, tr. W.D. Ross (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), page 1553.

The common denominator is some sort of *intellectual movement*, moving from the directly experienced to the not-so-directly experienced. Discovery then, in both philosophical and scientific arenas, can be described as *dynamic*, moving from what is better known, most obvious, or directly observed to positing the existence of something relatively lesser known and unobserved.

But on what basis are these queries made? Either this process is based on some principle (def. “that from which anything proceeds”) or it is not. Since, as Aristotle admitted, a principle-less inference would fall victim to an infinite regress and thus is impossible, we can reasonably ask just what is the philosophical underpinning or operative principle behind such movements in reason? Why do we ask why? On what basis do we suppose, or even presuppose, that there are indeed explanations, reasons, or causes really out there that will satisfy our investigations?

The underlying operative formula in the above examples is that there has to be some reason [R] that explains some event [E]. But, is it just a mere assumption or human wishful thinking that the universe will “cooperate” with our subjective thirst for these explanations? Some philosophers, as we will see, have argued just that point. If they are right, then a tremendously large portion of philosophical and scientific inquiry about how the world operates and what is “real” has proceeded from an irrational basis, rendering any conclusion based on such irrationality equally irrational.

If, however, it could be shown that such a principle is grounded in reason and can be reasonably defended, then these “rails” upon which philosophy and science operate would of course be vindicated, and any conclusions based on it, justified as well.

So what exactly is this principle? In our unreflective, intuitional, everyday speech, it goes something like “Things do not just happen ‘out of the blue,’ something has to make them happen!” In ancient and medieval times, the principle about which we are concerned was sometimes implicit, and other times explicit, albeit with various formulations, such as; “Nothing gives what it does not have,” “There cannot be more in the effect than what was contained in the cause,” “Whatever begins to exist must have a cause,” or more frequently, *ex nihilo nihil fit* – “Out of nothing, nothing comes.”

In this dissertation, I will propose that the *principle of sufficient reason* is the grand formulation of these intuitions and scholastic dictums, and thus is the principle that lies behind all of our casual inferences. Leibniz explicitly coined this term, yet he claimed not to discover any new principle, rather only to encapsulate all the implicit formulations used in the history of philosophy. The principle of sufficient reason is commonly formulated as such: “Every being has the sufficient reason for its existence (i.e., the adequate ground or basis in existence) either in itself or in another.”<sup>4</sup> Stated negatively, “Out of nothing, nothing comes” (being neither comes from nor can be determined by sheer nothing).<sup>5</sup> The principle of sufficient reason, then, is simply an attempt to conveniently summarize, in one basic formula, the common intuitions of everyday

---

<sup>4</sup> Some of Leibniz’s formulations of the principle of sufficient reason (“Nothing takes place without sufficient reason,” “Nothing exists without there being a greater reason for it to exist than for it not to exist,” “Nothing happens without a reason why it should be so rather than otherwise,” or simply, *nihil est sine ratione*) are perhaps the most familiar.

<sup>5</sup> These propositions may appear to differ; however, I will explain the relationship between the principle of sufficient reason and various causal and *ex nihilo* principles in Chapter III.

life and what other great philosophers have either presupposed or loosely articulated in these more specialized formulas of the “principle of causality.”

Leibniz once said that without the principle of sufficient reason, very little in philosophy and science could be demonstrated. In a similar vein, the contemporary Thomistic philosopher, Norris Clarke, has called the principle of sufficient reason *the dynamic principle of metaphysics*, since it is in virtue of this very principle that enables the mind to pass from one being to another in order to make sense out of it: “*All advance in thought to infer the existence of some new being from what we already know depends upon this principle.*”<sup>6</sup>

Although having different formulations, it is fair to say that some formulation of the principle of sufficient reason has enjoyed widespread acceptance throughout the history of Western philosophy. Yet “nothing is so true that it cannot be denied [at least] orally.”<sup>7</sup> The principle has its share of deniers; most notably Nicholas of Autrecourt in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, David Hume in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and many philosophers in our age, such as J. L. Mackie<sup>8</sup> and William Rowe.<sup>9</sup> In fact, today the common tendency in academia seems to regard the principle with *suspicion*, and very often the phrase “principle of sufficient reason” is loaded with contempt and derogatory implications. Most contemporary literature is not very favorable to the principle, and bashing the principle as “rationalist” seems to be a sort of current philosophical fad. Indeed, Quentin Smith is correct in saying, “The Principle of Sufficient Reason has very few contemporary defenders of

---

<sup>6</sup> Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), page 21. Emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*, I. 19.

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and Against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

any of its versions...”<sup>10</sup> The anti-principle of sufficient reason mentality enjoys such an extensive ascendancy that one can casually dismiss the principle with little more than a verbal wave of the hand.<sup>11</sup>

## USAGE OF THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON IN PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

In spite of the current academic mentality opposing the principle, we should consider three important aspects of our rational lives that not only presuppose the principle, but also, more importantly, simply could not survive without it. First is the common sense intuition shared by nearly all of us that things do not just happen for no reason. As we mentioned, the "out of nothing, nothing comes" principle is very commonly presupposed in daily inferences, and numerous examples are available from just a brief reflection. From the sound of a dog barking, we infer a real dog is the source of that sound; from certain tracks formed in the mud, we intuit that some animal is responsible for those shapes; from the sip of coffee, we ascertain that the taste we experience is the result of that action, and so on. It should be obvious how at least some versions of the principle of sufficient reason are involved in such everyday examples. Indeed, it is difficult to see how daily life could function normally without such a presupposition.

---

<sup>10</sup> Quentin Smith, "A Defense of a Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 26(1-2), January/April 1995, page 97.

<sup>11</sup> For example, we could consider Ginger Lee's 2006 PhD dissertation, *David Hume and The Principle of Sufficient Reason* (Marquette, 2006) which rejects the principle for apparently no reason other than an uncritical acceptance of Hume's critique of causality coupled with an *assertion* about the truth of Schopenhauer's transcendental epistemology. It declares, "The transcendental position shares with Hume a total lack of confidence in our ability to access what is 'out there'" (page 189). Such cavalier rejections are commonplace. Rarely are arguments for the principle taken into consideration, and cogent arguments offered against it are of equal rarity.

What is perhaps less apparent, or at least what seems to escape many academics, is the *frequency* with which this principle has been employed in both philosophy and science. Science and philosophy too to a great extent require such a principle. Why? *That* a certain state of affairs *can* be explained (that is, reasons given for why it is so) is a fundamental assumption of nearly any investigation: philosophical, scientific, or everyday common sense. What we might call a “sufficient reason presumption” is that reality is intelligible; hence, there is a reason or explanation why things are the way they are, and so with enough reflection and/or investigation we can, at least in principle, discover that reason. It seems patently clear that without such a presumption, it is futile to begin any investigation, therefore making the principle of sufficient reason an imperative starting point for practically all philosophy and science. Without understanding how critical such a notion is, one will not grasp the *radically foundational* and *ubiquitous* nature of the principle of sufficient reason. Let us look at a few examples to clarify this point.

### **The Assumption of Intelligibility in Science**

Why, one might ask, is the principle of sufficient reason needed for science? The answer is simple - science needs the principle of sufficient reason because science seeks explanations of phenomena. Science seeks answers as to why things happen, and as Aristotle once said, when we ask “why” of something, we are asking for a *cause*. That statement may appear naive to those educated in current philosophies of science. Yet if we put the philosophers of science aside and look at the scientists themselves, common experience tells us they have no problem searching for the causes of things. The typical “in the trenches” researcher has never read Kuhn, has never even heard Humean event causation, and would not know anything about explaining things only

by a “mathematical representation.” To be sure, the ordinary scientist has no problem saying things like “smoking has been 'linked' (read: known to cause) to cancer,” “Being overweight makes one 'prone' (again: likely to cause) to heart disease,” and so on. By putting aside deeper philosophical disputes that occur only in sanitized academic environments, it certainly seems true that scientists today quite frequently seek causal explanations, and if those scientists were not antecedently convinced that everything that happens has a cause, they would never begin their research in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, it was the question, “Why do people really get sick?” that led seekers to the germ theory of disease. It was the difficulty over the quandary, “How can we stop infection?” that led Louis Pasteur to the discovery of antibiotics. When one researcher wanted to know how to stop viruses, that line of inquiry led to the development of vaccines. Clearly it was the problem, “What causes the human body to follow a certain set of instructions in its development versus some other path?” that led a certain group of researchers to the conclusion that human genes made up of DNA are the responsible entities.

This assumption that phenomena in the world can be explained is not limited to the directly observable either. After all, what is a magnetic field? A magnetic field consists of “lines of force” surrounding a magnet or charged particle. Do we ever see these “lines of force?” No. Then how do we know they exist? Because we see two magnets interact with one another, and these fields

---

<sup>12</sup> I am reminded of a citation by Maritain taken from Georges Urbain regarding what scientists might think of philosophical idealism. “There is perhaps not a single chemist who confuses the reality of barium sulfate with the idea he has formed of it. I was once curious enough to put the question to some of them. They all found it rather queer. From the startled looks they gave me I could see they all thought me mad to ask such a question.” (Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, tr. Gerald B. Phelan (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), page 52, n.381). This observation correlates my own experience that philosophers ought not to assume that most scientists get deeply involved in philosophy of science. In the same way, I find that few mathematicians have bothered asking themselves about the ontological status of numbers.

must exist since something must be causing this reaction between the two magnets. Iron filings may *represent* the fields, but of course the iron filings themselves are not the magnetic fields. What is a “black hole?” A place where ordinary gravity has become so extreme that it overwhelms all other forces in the universe, including light. But if we cannot see them, how do we know they exist? Scientists infer their existence by the observed instances of extreme gravitational pulls confined to a particular area. The black holes are not directly observable. They are known to exist through their effects. We may also ask, “How did the universe originate?” Many scientists believe that it happened about 13.7 billion years ago with a massive explosion called the Big Bang. Of course, no one has directly witnessed the emergence of the universe, but scientists make the inference nevertheless because they observe a certain effect (like the expansion rate of the universe), and reason that there must be a reason for the phenomena, thus something must be the reason why it is happening at all. Nobody has ever seen the Big Bang that initialized our universe, but scientists quite reasonably infer that it existed based upon the effects we see today.

Nor is this presumption of intelligibility confined merely to the undisputed success stories. How did human beings arrive on Earth? Many “old-school” Darwinian biologists tell us that it is the result of a slow, constant, and consistent series of chance genetic mutation acted upon by natural selection. But “punk eek” (punctuated equilibrium) evolutionists challenge this gradualism. This explanation is not sufficient, they say, since evidence from fossils does not bear out Darwin's theory of gradual change. The fossil record shows more sporadic jumps, hence the process must have occurred in spurts, with periods of little change (“stasis”) and then massive change, leveling out again to a period of very little change. But again, still other evolutionists challenge *both* of

these positions. Both the Darwinian evolutionist's explanation and the punk eek explanation lack explanatory scope since they do not sufficiently account for the origin of life in the first place. This third group of *panspermia* evolutionists holds that life must come from life, and so we should seek our ancestry in the realm of outer space, being open to the idea that alien life forms "seeded" the earth with life millions of years ago. The point here is that regardless of whichever interpretation has more merit, it is still assumed by all parties that *something* must explain the arrival of human beings on our planet.

In all of these cases, there are questions about the world - the scientist asks *why* something is the case, *what* makes something happen, etc., and there are reasons "out there" to be found. The world (at least in itself) is an understandable and explainable place. There are reasons why these things occur. If one group gives an explanation that is inadequate in some way (say, for example, it lacks explanatory scope), another group will point out the inadequacy in the theory. There may indeed be debate over whether or not a thesis is adequate or not, but never once is the scientific mind content with statements like "One's eye color does not come from anything," "Nothing is responsible for diseases," "Nothing is causing this extreme gravitational attraction," "The human species came from absolutely nothing," and so on. In all of these cases, reason passes from an observable instance of something to infer the existence of some thing else not directly observable in order to explain, ground, and make sense of the first. Without this assumption that the world is intelligible in this way, science could do very little. A chaotic world in which diseases, the human species, not to mention car dealerships and supermarkets can just pop into existence out of

nowhere is not the world in which we live nor the world that science investigates. *Ex nihilo nihil fit* is therefore an important scientific principle.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Assumption of Intelligibility in Philosophy**

“When I was young Cebes, I had a prodigious desire to know that department of philosophy which is called the investigation of nature; to know the causes of things, and why a thing is and is created or destroyed appeared to me to be a lofty profession.”<sup>14</sup>

- Plato

If there is something that philosophy “does,” it is at least a disciplined attempt to understand and explain things. Whether the questions are about ethics, the mind/body problem, or the nature of God, just where would the search for wisdom be without a starting principle that things like these need explaining? Philosophers seek answers and are not typically satisfied with primitive inexplicable notions. The notion that states of affairs just do not come into being for no reason and that the universe is therefore intelligible gives us a sort philosophical “right” to ask “why” certain things are the way they are. Such a starting point is a critical factor to the wonder that is specific to philosophy. Without such a principle, philosophy would not get very far at all.

Before we look at some historical examples, let me clarify a point. As I briefly mentioned, this assumption of intelligibility, which I am calling the principle of sufficient reason, comes in many shapes and sizes. It frequently appears under different formulations, and often is not explicitly stated at all. It may appear from time to time in what I will call its logical form, and at other times, in its ontological form. The point being is that when one goes looking for a principle that

---

<sup>13</sup> In fact, the atheist Bertrand Russell argued the causal principle was as certain as any other physical law (*The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 68-9). Yet Russell wants to minimize the scope of the principle, claiming that the principle is a physical principle, and not a true metaphysical insight. This last move is erroneous, as I will explain later.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 96a.

posits reality as intelligible and require reasons, he ought not to look for any single formulation of the principle in the history of philosophy. One needs to be open to different ways of saying (or assuming) the same thing. So while Leibniz's full-blown statement of the principle will hardly appear as something used by other thinkers, nevertheless some version of it is always present in philosophical reasoning. Consequently, the history of philosophy is full of examples that make use of interpretations of the principle of sufficient reason.

The listing here does not, in any way, claim to be exhaustive of all the thinkers who have used the principle. Rather, it is simply a concise attempt to show, by only a handful of examples, just how radically important, widespread, and foundational the principle has been in philosophy.

Parmenides' argument against change and multiplicity is a good place to start.<sup>15</sup> Parmenides argues for the impossibility of change and multiplicity based on his hard disjunction of being and not-being. Things cannot come anew from being, nor can they be distinguished from one another by being (since whatever is already has "being"), *nor can things come from or be distinguished by nothing*. Ergo, change and multiplicity of being is impossible. Parmenides then wants us to conclude that since change and multiplicity cannot be accounted for, such notions should be rejected. But why does change and multiplicity need an explanation? In other words, why is it that change cannot come into being from nothing? Parmenides does not say.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *The Physics*, 191a1-191b10.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Barnes argues that Parmenides' use of the idea that all happenings must have an explanation, and that explanation must be sufficient for what they explain, is an application of the principle of sufficient reason. "The phrase *husteron ê prosthen* is sometimes translated 'later rather than sooner,' or 'at one time rather than at another.' Thus, Parmenides is applying the Principle of Sufficient Reason." Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1989), page 187.

Socrates was concerned with asking definitional questions because he wants to construct an *episteme* for ethics. For example, “What is virtue?” Virtue can be explained, and the *elenchos* is worthwhile because it will help us “give an account” of virtue. A successful definition or “account” of virtue provide all of the necessary and sufficient conditions that apply to it (neither too broad, narrow, nor circular), and it must, *pace* the Sophists, be *objective*, viz., the definition needs to reflect realities that are able to be *discovered* and not merely determined by taking a poll or appealing to convention. As we all know, Socrates thinks knowledge fits these criteria.<sup>17</sup> *Virtue is reducible to knowledge*. To know the good is to do it. There is no such thing as a wise man who chooses wrong, and so “akratic” behavior (*akrasia*) is impossible. For Socrates, virtue can be explained. It is not the case that virtue and wisdom mutually imply each other, but rather, virtue is *identifiable* with wisdom - it is just wisdom by another name.

Socrates is, of course, presupposing here that moral character can be *accounted for* and *explained*. The whole basis of his reasoning presumes that good behavior does not just happen “out of the blue” without any reason whatsoever. On the contrary, Socrates thinks there are real reasons that bring about or *cause* good character. The presence of good moral character has a sufficient reason for its existence; knowledge explains why it is there. If Socrates were open to the possibility of anything (virtue included) coming into being from nothing, his argument would be desperately crippled.

Plato wanted to defend certain knowledge (*episteme*) as something over and above the mere belief held by common men. Belief is fallible, but the true knowledge of the philosopher must be something incorrigible. But if the philosopher has this certain knowledge, what is its object?

---

<sup>17</sup> For example, we see this view discussed throughout Plato’s *Meno*.

Certain knowledge cannot be sufficiently accounted for by appealing to sensible particulars. The mutable nature of sensible objects renders them ontologically unfit to be the objects of *episteme*. Something else then must be posited. Plato thinks that the feature of incorrigibility (on the epistemic side) must be matched or explained by certain features on the metaphysical side. If the knowledge is necessary and unchanging, so too must be the objects of that knowledge. The existence of incorrigible knowledge needs to be explained by the existence of unchanging, eternally abstract objects.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, from the *epistemological* fact about certain knowledge, Plato makes *metaphysical* inferences. The Forms are the ontological conclusions that are inferred to exist based upon certain epistemological premises. It is not that Plato claims that we can see or experience these Forms with our senses; rather, Plato thinks that abstract objects must exist because they are the only sorts of things that can account for *episteme*. Plato wants to say that the Forms (if we may use the Aristotelian terminology) are at least the *material* causes of our knowledge, even if something else, such as illumination by the Form of the Good, may serve as some sort of *efficient* cause as well.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> “If understanding and true opinion are distinct, then these 'by themselves' things definitely exist - these Forms, the objects not of our sense perception, but of our understanding only. But if - as some people think - true opinion does not differ in any way from understanding, then all the things we perceive through our bodily senses must be assumed to be the most stable things there are. But we do have to speak of understanding and true opinion as distinct, of course, because we can come to have one without the other, and the one is not like the other... ..Since these things are so, we must agree that (i) that which keeps its own form unchangingly, which has not been brought into being, and is not destroyed, which neither receives into itself anything else from anywhere else, nor itself enters into anything else anywhere, is one thing. It is invisible - it cannot be perceived by the senses at all, and it is the role of understanding to study it. (ii) The second thing is that which shares the other's name and resembles it. This thing can be perceived by the senses, and it has been begotten. It is constantly borne along, now coming into being in a certain place and perishing out of it. It is apprehended by opinion, which involves sense perception. . . .” (Plato, *Timaeus*, 51d.)

<sup>19</sup> Not to mention other indications that the Forms serve as some sort of formal/efficient cause: “For I cannot help thinking that if there be anything beautiful other than absolute beauty, that can only be beautiful in as far as it partakes of absolute beauty - and this I should say of everything. Do you agree in this notion of the cause?... ..I leave all that, which is only confusing to me, and simply and singly, and perhaps foolishly, hold and am assured in my own mind that nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence and participation of beauty in whatever way or manner obtained.” (Plato, *Phaedo*:100b-e.)

But one might wonder why one should bother with claiming the existence of unseen abstract objects. Why is it that certain knowledge cannot just exist as an uncaused “brute fact,” with no explanation at all? Why not just say that *episteme* has no cause or explanation? The only answer seems to be that Plato just implicitly rules this option out. Out of nothing, *nothing* comes - not even *episteme*. *Episteme* needs to be explained and accounted for, and the Forms, although not a sufficient condition, are at least a necessary condition for its existence.

Aristotle thought the very nature of philosophical inquiry was to know the principles of things, and so defends the idea of *causes* as explanations. Wisdom, he says, not only deals with the causes and principles of things, but wisdom actually is a causal understanding of the world.<sup>20</sup> That things in the world can be explained in terms of their causes is taken for granted, and this notion serves as the whole basis of the philosophical enterprise. That we can and need to explain things in terms of causes and principles enables Aristotle to frequently make existential inferences from things directly perceived to what must exist to ground those observances. Take motion, for example. How is it that motion occurs? What must reality be like in order for there to be motion at all? The Megarics took the position that there is only actuality; anything that is not actuality is nothingness. But Aristotle says this view does away with movement and becoming. Since movement and becoming are obvious facts about the world around us, *there must be more to reality* than what the Megarics say. The Megaric dichotomy is false, and Aristotle goes between its horns by saying there is a third alternative. There is more to being than simple

---

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I 982a1.

actuality, another level of being he calls “potency.” Potency is a level of being that is real but not actual, it is an *ability* to be act but which is not act.<sup>21</sup>

We see here a lucid example of reason moving from the observed to the unobserved. Aristotle moves from directly observable motion to inferring the existence of a non-observable level of being called potency. But why does he posit the existence of this unobservable “potency?” Why say such a thing exists in any way at all? What is the methodology or reasoning process behind this inference? There seems to be no other option except for holding that if a given set of alternatives cannot suffice in explaining X, another thing must be added until X is sufficiently accounted for and explained (because X must be explained). But this “adding of entities” method is really nothing other than presupposing that something cannot come from nothing. Since what we have cannot suffice for an explanation (and since “out of nothing, nothing comes,” ergo nothing is not a viable option), another entity must be added, and so on. The idea that motion can be just an unexplainable “brute fact,” without any reason or principle behind it, seems to be an impossible alternative for Aristotle. This is the same methodology we also see operative in the philosophical distinctions of form/matter and substance/accident. Things need reasons, motion needs a reason, and the doctrine of potency helps to fill that role.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> This discussion occurs in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Book IX, 1047a4 ff. Jonathan Barnes argues that Aristotle makes use of the principle of sufficient reason in the *Physics* as well: “Aristotle later applied the Principle of Sufficient Reason: *Physics* 252a4” (Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1989), page 614). For further discussion on Aristotle's use of the principle of sufficient reason in the *Metaphysics*, Vasilis Politis argues that “[Aristotle] is clearly working with some version of the principle of sufficient reason.” He concludes by saying that Aristotle's philosophical project, in that it is a search for explanations or causes, must presuppose an assumption of the principle of sufficient reason: “If we ask why Aristotle is working with such a strong principle of sufficient reason, the answer is, evidently, because he wants to push the overall project, i.e., the project of searching for explanations - reasons, causes - as far as it will go.” (Vasilis Politis, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 2004) pp. 273-5). Others argue that Aristotle's need to explain motion follows motion's characterization as an accident. See John F. X. Knasas, “Thomistic Existentialism and the Proofs Ex Motu at Contra Gentiles I, c. 13,” *The Thomist* 59/4, 1995, pp. 591-615.

<sup>22</sup> As J. Maritain notes, “The principle of sufficient reason precedes the division of being into potency and act. To apprehend its necessity there is no need first to have made recognized this distinction.” Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures on Being* (New York: Mentor Omega, 1962), page 103.

One could also mention St. Augustine's famous argument from eternal truths to an eternal mind that grounds those truths.<sup>23</sup> In short, humans are all aware of ideas they have within their souls, ideas which by their very nature are universal and necessary. But these universal and necessary ideas cannot originate from us, nor can they come from the external material world, since these are contingent beings lacking any characteristic of universality or necessity. Ergo, there must be some necessary being or eternal mind that serves as a transcendent anchor for these truths.

But again, as we asked of Plato, why does Augustine think these truths need an explanation or ground at all? Why is it that they cannot just be “eternally true” without any justification or “ontological ground?” Presumably, it is because he thinks it is simply evident that things (in this case, necessary truths) need reasons as to why they are a certain way and not otherwise. *Something* must account for these ideas; it cannot just be “nothing.” If it were nothing, these ideas would be unaccounted for, lacking a sufficient reason. Since contingent beings are an insufficient account for these truths, our minds must look elsewhere and assert the existence of a higher being that better accounts for them.

The Arabic scholastics utilized an idea which in modern times has been coined, “the principle of determination.” Thinkers in this tradition frequently invoked a need for some selecting agent to determine the existence of one possibility over other alternatives. The principle of determination holds that between things equally possible (to be or not to be), some sort of determinant, *cause*,

---

<sup>23</sup> See Augustine of Hippo, *De Libero Arbitrio*, Bk II.

*reason*, or *selecting agent (murajjih)* is called for to bring into being one possible over the other.

We see this idea for example in al-Ghazali:

*It is an axiom of reason that all that comes to be must have a cause to bring it about. The world has come to be. Ergo, the world must have a cause to bring it about. The proposition, "What comes to be must have a cause" is obvious, for everything that takes place occupies a certain span of time, yet it is conceivable that it come about earlier or later. Its confinement to the particular time span it actually fills demands some determinant to select the time.*<sup>24</sup>

The need of an agent-like determination to make one possibility an actuality from among other possibilities is also used by al-Farabi. Farabi makes a distinction between *what* a thing is: it is essence (*mahiyyah*) and *that* it is, it is existence (*huwiyyah*). All things that exist, exist either necessarily (if its essence includes existence), or possibly (its nature does not include the notion of existence).<sup>25</sup> This division is exhaustive. Of everything that exists, that fact of existence is either from the very essence of the thing or it is not. Hence, anything that exists is either necessary or possible. Everything that is a possible being, however, needs a cause to bring into being:

---

<sup>24</sup> Al-Ghazali, "The Jerusalem Tract," trans. and ed. A.L. Tibawi, *The Islamic Quarterly*, 9 (1965), page 98 (emphasis mine), cited in William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument: From Plato to Leibniz* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1980), page 58. Craig disputes any equating of the principle of determination to the principle of sufficient reason since he (mistakenly, I say) seems to think that the term "reason" can apply only to motives and not to causes. We will address this misconception in Chapter III.

<sup>25</sup> "Everything that is belongs to one of two kinds. In the case of beings of the first kind, existence is not involved in their essence. These are called 'of possible existence.' In the case of being of the second kind, its essence does involve existence. These are called 'necessarily existent.'" Alfarabi, *Philosophische Abhandlungen*, ed. F. Dieterichi (Leiden: Brill, 1890), page 90, cited in Craig, page 81.

Transition from not-being to being demands an actual cause. This cause either has its essence identical with its existence or not. If it does, then being is uncaused. If it does not, then existence must be from another, and that from another, and so on until we arrive at a First Cause, whose essence differs in no way from its existence.<sup>26</sup>

For al-Farabi, there is nothing that exists that does not have existence, and this existence can be had only essentially or through another being. There is no being without existence, and there is no being for whom existence is unaccounted. All existence is either essential or from another. Nothing comes from nothing.

Along the same lines, Avicenna's argument for the existence of God is interesting because it seems to anticipate the principle of sufficient reason by posing a dichotomy that resembles later formulations of the principle. Avicenna offers an argument from contingency to the existence of a necessary being, arguing that a series of contingent beings must terminate into that necessary being.

Whatever has being must either have a reason for its being or have no reason for it. If it has a reason, then it is contingent... Likewise, if it has no reason for its being in any way whatsoever, then it is necessary in its being. This rule being confirmed, I shall now proceed to prove that there is in being a being which has no reason for its being.

---

<sup>26</sup> Alfarabi text from Robert Hammond, *The Philosophy of Alfarabi and its Influence on Medieval Thought* (New York: Hobsen Book Press, 1947), page 20, cited in Craig, page 84.

Such a being is either contingent or necessary. If it is necessary, then the point we sought to prove is established. If, on the other hand, it is contingent, that which is contingent cannot enter upon being, except for some reason which sways the scales in favor of its being and against non-being. If the reason is also contingent, then there is a chain of contingents linked to one another, and there is no being at all, for this being which is the subject of our hypothesis cannot enter into being so long as it is not preceded by an infinite succession of beings, which is absurd.<sup>27</sup>

In this passage, Avicenna seems to use the word “reason” in a more restricted sense to mean “cause.” Thus reformulated it reads, “Whatever has being must either be caused or necessary.” This means that in Avicenna’s universe, the existence of *every existing being is accounted for*. Whatever exists is either caused by another or it exists *a se*. There are no *tertium quid* sorts of beings that have no reason at all, that is, an alleged being that exists neither necessarily nor through a cause. This dichotomy of “whatever exists, exists either from the necessity of its own nature or from the causal efficacy of another being” is what we will later call a “strong” principle of sufficient reason.

The Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides assumes the truthfulness of *ex nihilo nihil fit* in his own argumentation for the existence of God. Rabbi Moses wants to show that the position that no things are eternal is false. If no things were eternal, then it is possible that all things could cease to exist, and if that, nothing would exist. But if nothing ever existed, then nothing would exist

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Sina, al-Risalat al-'Arshiya, in Arthur J. Arberry, *Avicenna on Theology* (London: John Murray, 1951), page 25, emphasis mine. The passage is cited in Craig, pp. 88-9. In this instance, it should be mentioned that Avicenna seems to be using “reason” as synonymous with “cause.”

now either: “All things therefore must come to an end, and then nothing would ever be in existence, for there would not exist any being to produce anything. Consequently, nothing whatever would exist.”<sup>28</sup> Whatever one might think of Maimonides' modal inference that all possibilities must be actualized over infinite time is an entirely separate issue from the fact that Maimonides assumes and implicitly holds to the truth of at least some version of the principle of sufficient reason.

Let us move ahead to St. Thomas Aquinas and his well-known *Quinque Viae*. These arguments start with apparent facts about the world, and proceed by reason into the *causes* of these apparent facts. Motion, causation, contingency, degrees of perfection, and things acting for an end all call for a more complete explanation - a prime mover, a first cause, etc. But how would these arguments ever get off the ground without presupposing that these sorts of events call for explanation in the first place? It should be easy for us to see and agree with the words of Gilson, “*Ex nihilo nihil fit*; therefore all movement presupposes a mover; every effect presupposes a cause; every contingent being a being *per se*; every series a first term; all order an orderer.”<sup>29</sup>

One can make a similar observation about Aquinas' argument for the existence and nature of the human soul. Human souls are not the kinds of things that one can directly observe. Rather, their existence and nature are conclusions derived from philosophical analysis. Aquinas holds that the soul is the “first principle of life of those things which live.” This principle is not a body (for

---

<sup>28</sup> Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, pt. II ch. 1, 2nd ed. rev., trans. M. Friedlander (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1928), page 152.

<sup>29</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, tr. Edward Bullough (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993), page 94. Norman Kretzmann concurs that Aquinas' cosmological proofs presuppose some version of the principle of sufficient reason: “Aquinas shows that he assumes or considers self-evident some form of 'the Principle of Sufficient Reason [PSR], a principle that in its strongest form maintains that no thing can exist and no fact can obtain without there being an explanation for that thing's existence or for that fact's obtaining.” (Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), page 107.

then all bodies would be alive), but the act of a body. Human souls have the additional properties of being incorporeal and subsistent, and Aquinas claims he knows this based on observed operations of the human intellect. The intellect's knowledge of universal natures is an operation *per se* apart from the body, and whatever can act *per se* apart from the body must be able to exist apart from such a body.<sup>30</sup>

Here it seems that Aquinas is using the principle labeled by later scholastics as *agere sequitur esse*, which signifies on the ontological side that actions are dependent on the nature of the thing, and thus, on the epistemological side, that we can know what a thing *is* by what it *does*. From an act of some sort, reason infers that there is an underlying nature that accounts for that act. Applying this method to the soul, we know the nature of the soul not by direct observance, but through the acts it performs. If the soul performs acts that are *per se* apart from a body, then the source of those acts must also be incorporeal, subsistent, and able to exist apart from the body. Whatever one may think of this particular argument is irrelevant. The point is that the claim presupposes that acts cannot just be unexplained entities coming into being from nothing. If acts could come into being from sheer nothing, then one could never make a valid argument about the nature of the soul or anything else that followed the *agere sequitur* principle. To be sure, if *ex nihilo nihil fit* is false, then the *agere sequitur* principle is false as well, and to whatever degree one doubts *ex nihilo nihil fit* one must also, to that same degree, doubt the *agere sequitur* principle.

---

<sup>30</sup> S.T. I.75.1-3 (vol. 5, page 150) Here Aquinas discusses principles of vital operations (*vitalis operationis principium*), as well as the principle of intellectual operations (*principium intellectualis operationis*). In other words, these vital and intellectual operations have a ground in a soul which is not itself directly observable.

There is more. The idea that “from nothing, nothing comes to be” is deeply imbedded and interwoven throughout the whole Thomistic fabric. It is difficult to find an argument that does not presuppose it in some way, and there are strong reasons to think the principle is truly metaphysical, enjoying universal applicability. To list just a few examples: in one instance, Aquinas defends a formulation of the principle remarkably similar to Avicenna's “tipping the scale between possibilities” argument mentioned above. Aquinas thinks that absolutely everything other than God - viz., all contingent realities, need a cause for their existence, since of themselves they are merely possible and “indifferent” to being or not being. *Something* is needed to overcome this indifference to being in order for such things to be at all: “Everything that has a possibility of being and of not being, needs something else to make it be, for, as far as it itself is concerned, it is indifferent with regard to either alternative.”<sup>31</sup> Aquinas gives a similar argument about all composite things, whether composed of form and matter or essence and existence. They, too, need a cause, but this time he states a different reason: “For things in themselves different cannot unite unless something *causes* them to unite.”<sup>32</sup> On another occasion, Aquinas uses an act/potency argument supporting *ex nihilo nihil fit* regarding the existence of the entire universe. He says that the most effective way to prove God's existence is from the supposition of the eternity of the world, which being supposed, it seems less manifest that God exists. “For if the world and movement had a beginning, it is clear that we must suppose some cause to have produced the world and movement, because *whatever becomes anew must take its origin from*

---

<sup>31</sup> *Compendium of Theology Part. 1 Ch. 6 (vol.42)*. Aquinas also uses this sort of “something that determines two possibilities” argument to argue for final causality: “I answer that, every agent, of necessity, acts for an end. For if, in a number of causes ordained to one another, the first be removed, the others must, of necessity, be removed also. Now the first of all causes is the final cause. The reason of which is that matter does not receive form, save in so far as it is moved by an agent; for nothing reduces itself from potentiality to act. But an agent does not move except out of intention for an end. *For if the agent were not determinate to some particular effect, it would not do one thing rather than another: consequently in order that it produce a determinate effect, it must, of necessity, be determined to some certain one*, which has the nature of an end.”(ST I-II.1.2, vol.6 page 9.), emphasis mine.

<sup>32</sup> “.Every composite has a cause, for things in themselves different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite.” S.T. I.3.7, (vol. 4, page 47) emphasis mine.

*some cause of its becoming*, since nothing evolves itself from potentiality to act, or from non-being to being.”<sup>33</sup>

The perceptive reader of Aquinas will also find a striking anticipation of Leibniz’s critique of Newtonian absolute time and space. Leibniz argued that space and time could not be eternal and absolute, since there would be no sufficient reason as to why God created the universe when He did and where He did. Aquinas says something remarkably similar to this idea that space and time cannot be eternal in response to the claim that the universe has always existed and thus could not have come into being:

Now God’s duration, which is eternity, does not have parts, but is utterly simple, without before and after... ..Therefore, the beginning of the whole of creation is not to be thought of in comparison to any diverse parts designated in some pre-existing measure... ..*So that there would have to be a reason in the agent why he brought the creature into being in this designated part of that duration rather than at some other preceding or subsequent point. Such a reason would be required if, beside the totality of created being, there existed some duration divisible into parts, as is the case in particular agents, which produce their effects in time, but do not produce time itself. God however, brought into being both the creature and time together ... Particular bodies are brought into being not only at a definite*

---

<sup>33</sup>“*Cum nihil educat se de potentia in actum vel de non esse in esse,*” (S.C.G. Bk 1, Ch. 13, vol. 13, page 33). Similarly, “Everything which was not always *manifestly* has a cause whereas this is not so manifest of what always was.” (*Si mundus non semper fuit, quam si semper fuisset, omne enim quod non semper fuit, manifestum est habere causam.*) (S.T. I.46.1 ad.6, vol. 4, page 480) (emphasis mine). This should not be confused with Aquinas’ frequent disagreement with the *ex nihilo nihil fit* axiom of the ancient philosophers (i.e., S.T. I.45.2 ad.1, vol. 4, page 466) and *De potentia*, q. 3 a. 1) where that statement meant that a *material* cause must always be presupposed. Aquinas thinks of course that God can create *ex nihilo* and, in such a case, there is an efficient cause but no material cause.

time, but also in a definite place; *and since the time and the place in which they are involved are extrinsic to them, there must be a reason why they are produced in this place and time rather than in another...* ..Outside the universe of creatures there is no time, time having been produced simultaneously with that universe; *hence we do not have to look for the reason why it was produced now and not before....*”<sup>34</sup>

It is worthy of note that in this text Aquinas seems to recognize what Leibniz would later; that if space and time were absolute (ie., independent beings in their own right) and eternal, God would indeed need a sufficient reason why He created the universe at one point in space and time rather than another. However, Aquinas’ response (which is shared by Leibniz, for that matter) is that space and time do not exist independently of the divine choice. The divine duration that existed logically prior to the temporal space-time duration is simple and not composed of parts, so there is no temporal “before” the creation of the universe within which God must operate. Aquinas’ admission of this point suggests his openness to extending the principle of sufficient reason beyond the purely ontological level of *ens reale* to the realm of *ens rationis*, and even more particularly, the *ratio* of choice.

More modern proponents of the principle of sufficient reason frequently use an exhaustive division in stating the principle: “Whatever exists must have a sufficient reason in itself or in another,” or something more akin to the Arabic Neoplatonist's “Everything that exists must have existence essentially or non-essentially.” These formulations convey the notion that everything either exists essentially (*per se*) or its existence is caused through another (*per aliud*), and

---

<sup>34</sup> *SCG II.35.6* , vol. page 349, emphasis is mine.

consequently there is nothing for whom existence is unaccounted. Likewise, Aquinas too makes these sorts of disjunctive statements, sometimes as major premises of an argument. For example, he does this when arguing that even the heavenly bodies have a potency for non-being:

But even if it is granted that a celestial body is not composed of matter and form, it still must be admitted that potency for non-being is in it in some way. *For it is necessary that each simple subsisting substance either is its own existence or participates in existence. A simple substance which is its own subsisting existence cannot exist except as one, just as whiteness, if it were subsisting, could not exist except as one. Therefore, every substance which is after the first simple substance participates in existence.*<sup>35</sup>

Even if the heavenly bodies were not composed of matter and form, they must still “participate” in existence, since only one being can be subsisting existence. What makes this passage noteworthy is the major premise that “it is necessary that each simple subsisting substance either is its own existence or participates in existence.” If we may put aside the question of whether it is a true first principle or not (more on this later), we can say with full confidence that a) Aquinas thinks it is *true*, b) he calls it “*necessary*,” and c) it seems to be the same as modern formulations of the principle of sufficient reason – “Whatever exists must have a sufficient reason for its existence either essentially or in the causal efficacy of some other being.” It is simply another way of saying the same thing.

---

<sup>35</sup> *In Meta. Bk 8 Lec 21* n.580, emphasis mine.

Interestingly enough, there is at least one instance where Aquinas actually uses and affirms the literal phrase “*ex nihilo nihil fit*” in the course of an argument. The context is Aquinas elaborating on Aristotle's explanation on how generation can come from non-being to being and he wants to clarify from what sort of “non-being” generation proceeds. Aquinas lists three sorts of non-being, the first of which is “what does not exist in any way; and it is from this kind of non-being that nothing is generated, *because in reality out of nothing, nothing comes.*”<sup>36</sup>

Aquinas then both implicitly and explicitly accepts and uses an *ex nihilo* principle, and also has a way of stating something very much like the principle of sufficient reason. That St. Thomas never explicitly appeals to a “principle of sufficient reason” here or anywhere else is entirely irrelevant. His argumentation either regularly presupposes it or invokes particular forms of it. (i.e., “Every changing being needs a cause”; “Every being that begins to exist needs a cause”; “Everything that has a possibility of being and of not being needs a cause”; “Every finite, composed being needs a cause”; etc.).<sup>37</sup> It may be a matter of debate in any of these examples whether Aquinas thinks these formulations of the principle of sufficient reason are true principles in the strict sense or conclusions to an argument. It is not our concern at this point to show one way or the other. The point at this juncture is that Aquinas thinks the principle is *true*. More will be said later on how to categorize the proposition.

---

<sup>36</sup> “*Dicitur enim non ens tripliciter. Uno modo quod nullo modo est; et ex tali non ente non fit generatio, quia ex nihilo nihil fit secundum naturam,*” *In Meta.*, lib. 12 l. 2 n. 14, emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup> One could also add, “Whatever perfection exists in an effect must be found in the effective cause” (S.T. I.4.2 ) We will see that critics of the principle, such as William Rowe, accuse Aquinas of holding to some version of the principle of sufficient reason in order for these arguments to be successful. That Aquinas does hold to a principle of sufficient reason I certainly agree. That he does so unjustifiably, however, is another matter.

Duns Scotus' argument for the existence of God is an attempt to prove the existence of a divine Being by way of a strict Aristotelian demonstration. Arguing for God's "triple primacy" was Scotus' attempt at showing there is a first in efficient causality, final causality, and perfection. During the course of his argumentation, Scotus explicitly appeals twice to an *ex nihilo* principle, viz., that something cannot be produced by nothing, for what is nothing causes nothing,<sup>38</sup> and again later: "From nothing, nothing is able to be."<sup>39</sup> Scotus makes no attempt to defend these statements so critical to his argument, which suggests he may take them as evident axioms.<sup>40</sup>

Nicholas of Autrecourt, the "medieval Hume" who was a contemporary of John Buridan at the University of Paris, cast doubt on the idea, since he held that we can only be certain of the principle of non-contradiction and anything that reduces to this principle.<sup>41</sup> From this point, Nicholas did not think that the principle of causality (viz., that whatever begins to exist must have a cause) could be derived from the principle of non-contradiction, and likewise argued that we lacked certitude regarding it: "From the fact that some thing is known to be, it cannot be inferred evidently, by evidentness reduced to the first principle, or to the certitude of the first principle, that there is some other thing."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> "Non a nihilo, quia nullius est causa illud quod nihil est." *Opus Oxoniense* I dist . II, q. i tr. in Ioannes Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 1987), page 39.

<sup>39</sup> "... A nullo nihil potest esse." *Ibid*, page 44.

<sup>40</sup> William Rowe also criticizes Scotus also on what he seems to think is an unwarranted assertion of the principle of sufficient reason principle. (See Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*, page 50).

<sup>41</sup> How one reduces the proposition that "we can only be certain of the principle of non-contradiction and anything that reduces to this principle" itself down to the principle of non-contradiction is an intriguing question one could put to Nicholas.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas of Autrecourt, *Letters to Bernard of Arezzo* (Second Letter 11).

Moving forward to the era of modern philosophy, not even the methodically doubting Descartes, who claimed to doubt all that was doubtful, dared to call into question the *ex nihilo* principle. At a crucial point in working his way out of the skeptical hole in which he had placed himself, Descartes advocated a contingency argument for the existence of God which makes use of the *ex nihilo* principle. One cannot get more “reality” in the effect than was contained in the causes that produced it: “Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must at least be as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect....what is cannot be produced by what is not...”<sup>43</sup> In fact, in his *Reply to Objections*, Descartes elaborates this point and explicitly calls *ex nihilo nihil fit* a “first principle”:

*That there is nothing in the effect, that has not existed in a similar or in some higher form in the cause, is a first principle than which nothing clearer can be entertained. The common truth “from nothing, nothing comes” is identical with it.*

For, if we allow that there is something in the effect which did not exist in the cause, we must also grant that this something has been created by nothing.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., tr., Donald Kress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), *Meditation III*, page 73.

<sup>44</sup> Descartes, *Reply to Objections II*, emphasis mine. For further insight into how the principle of sufficient reason plays an important role in Descartes method of doubt, see Janet Broughton’s *Descartes’ Method of Doubt*. She writes, “I have been arguing in this chapter that for Descartes, the premises of the argument that God exists have a special status. He has already discovered that he cannot rationally doubt that he himself exists and has the many states - states of thought - that are conditions of his using the method of doubt. Now he claims he cannot doubt that he has an idea of God or that the principle of sufficient reason is true. But his possession of the idea of God entails that God exists, given the principle of sufficient reason and the consequences Descartes thinks it has. This means that he is entitled to absolute certainty about the existence not just of himself and his modes of thought, but also of God, the infinitely perfect creator of everything (Janet Broughton, *Descartes’ Method of Doubt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), page 170). Pols makes a similar observation: “In Meditation III, Descartes tries to extricate himself from the predicament created by the nature of his initial certainties. He singles out one idea that has a privileged status, the idea of God understood as the Perfect Being. He argues that what is represented to the thinker in that idea assures the thinker of the existence of God. The chief resource used in the proof - I pass over the details of the proof itself - is a precursor of what is usually called the principle of sufficient reason, although it might with equal justice be called the principle of sufficient cause. (Edward Pols, *Mind Regained* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), page 50). Pols, interestingly enough, traces the history of the principle of sufficient reason beyond Descartes and back to the Aristotelian/Platoninc tradition (albeit he formulates the principle erroneously as “everything has a cause” when doing so): “The expression ‘principle of sufficient reason’ seems to have been invented by Leibniz. . . . To be sure, Descartes’ causal principle is not the only precursor of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason. The notion that everything has a cause and that the cause must be adequate/sufficient to produce it

John Locke is as explicit about the *ex nihilo nihil fit* principle and does not hesitate to label its denial as the greatest of all absurdities. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he comments:

I never yet heard of any one so unreasonable, or that could suppose so manifest a contradiction, as a time wherein there was perfectly nothing. *This being of all absurdities the greatest, to imagine that pure nothing, the perfect negation and absence of all beings, should ever produce any real existence.*<sup>45</sup>

And again:

He knows also that nothing cannot produce a being; therefore something must have existed from eternity. In the next place, *man knows, by an intuitive certainty, that bare nothing can no more produce any real being, than it can be equal to two right angles.* If a man knows not that nonentity, or the absence of all being, cannot be equal to two right angles, it is impossible he should know any demonstration in Euclid. If, therefore, we know there is some real being, and that nonentity cannot produce any real being, it is an evident demonstration, that from eternity there has been something; since what was not from eternity had a beginning; and what had a beginning must be produced by something else.<sup>46</sup>

---

is a commonplace of the Aristotelian tradition. The earliest clear formulations of such a principle are probably those of Plato in *Philebus* (26E) and *Timaeus* (28A).” *Ibid*, page 139.

<sup>45</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Book IV, ch. X, (1690), page 411, emphasis mine.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, page 474, emphasis mine.

Benedict Spinoza was explicit about his support of the principle. He uses a common disjunctive style formulation similar to what we saw in Avicenna and Aquinas. In *The Ethics* we read that the proposition, “Everything which exists, exists either in itself or in something else” is his first axiom.<sup>47</sup> Later Spinoza argues that “of everything whatsoever that exists a cause or a reason must be assigned. . . . This reason or cause must either be contained in the nature of the thing in question, or external to it.”<sup>48</sup> Although Spinoza does not give this axiom a special name, we will see later that it is quite like what I will later call the metaphysical formulation of the principle of sufficient reason.

Leibniz is the first philosopher to encapsulate all of these various formulations under the term “principle of sufficient reason.” He said he did not claim to “discover” this principle, but to have recognized its fundamental significance. Perhaps the best summary of his view is stated in the *Monadology*: “Our reasonings are grounded upon two great principles, that of contradiction. . . . And that of sufficient reason, in virtue of which we hold that there can be no fact real or existing, no statement true, unless there be a sufficient reason, why it should be so and not otherwise, although these reasons usually cannot be known by us.”<sup>49</sup> In the way Leibniz forms the principle here, we can say that he holds both to an ontological formulation of the principle of sufficient reason referring to facts “real or existing” as well as a logical principle of sufficient reason that refers to statements. It is the ontological formulations of the principle, however, that appear more frequently in Leibniz's writings, such as “nothing exists without there being a

---

<sup>47</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *The Ethics* (see Axiom I) in *On the Improvement of the Understanding, The Ethics, Correspondence*, tr. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications 1955), page 46.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, page 51.

<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Rescher, cited in G. W. Leibniz's *Monadology: An Edition for Students* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), pp. 31-2.

greater reason for it to exist than for it not to exist,”<sup>50</sup> or perhaps more popularly from this famous passage from the *Theodicy*:

Nothing ever comes to pass without there being a cause or at least a reason determining it. . . . This great principle holds for all events, and a contrary instance will never be supplied: and although more often than not we are insufficiently acquainted with these determinant reasons, we perceive nevertheless that there are such.<sup>51</sup>

It is not as if mere humans are able to always *know* what the sufficient reason is for something. Nonetheless, we perceive that these reasons must be. To be sure: “We know 'by an intuitive certainty, that bare nothing [cannot] produce any real being.' Whence it follows with mathematical evidence that something has existed from all eternity; since whatever 'had a beginning must be produced by something else.’”<sup>52</sup>

Following Avicenna and Aquinas, Leibniz also sees the principle of sufficient reason as a sort of selecting or determining factor that overcomes the “indifference” to being between different possible outcomes:

---

<sup>50</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *On Contingency* in *Philosophical Essays*, tr. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), page 29.

<sup>51</sup> Leibniz, *Theodicy* 44, tr. E.M. Huggard (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1988), page 147.

<sup>52</sup> Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, tr. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), page 435.

This sufficient reason for the existence of the universe cannot be found in the series of contingent things, that is, in the series of bodies and their representations in souls; for, since matter is in itself indifferent to motion and rest, and to one motion rather than another, we cannot find in matter the reason for motion, still less the reason for a particular motion. And although the present motion found in matter comes from the preceding motion, and it, in turn, comes from a preceding motion, we will not make any progress in this way, however far back we go, for the same question always remains.<sup>53</sup>

The sufficient reason is then what makes the indifference between motion and rest to be one or the other. Like Avicenna, Leibniz too alludes to the analogy of a sufficient reason as being the factor that “tips the scale” between why things are the way they are versus otherwise:

In order to proceed from mathematics to natural philosophy, another principle is required, as I have observed in my *Theodicy*; I mean the principle of sufficient reason, namely, that nothing happens without a reason why it should be so rather than otherwise. And therefore Archimedes, being desirous to proceed from mathematics to natural philosophy, in his book *De aequilibro*, was obliged to make use of a particular case of the great principle of sufficient reason. He 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. Now by that single principle, namely, that there ought to be a

---

<sup>53</sup> Leibniz, “The Principles of Nature and Grace Based On Reason,” in *Philosophical Essays*, page 210.

sufficient reason why things should be so and not otherwise, one may demonstrate the being of God and all the other parts of metaphysics or natural theology and even, in some measure, those principles of natural philosophy that are independent of mathematics. . .<sup>54</sup>

One can almost see an argument from analogy here. Just like a scale that is equally balanced, with no reason (weight) to make it tip to one side over the other, so there must be a reason why things exist one way and not otherwise.

In his response to Newton, Leibniz defended the principle against the charge of “begging the question.” We cite here the relevant passage at length:

He pretended that I have been guilty of a *petitio principii*. But of what principle, I beseech you? Would to God less clear principles had never been laid down. The principle in question is the principle of the want of a sufficient reason for a thing to exist, for an event to happen, for any truth's taking place. Is this a principle that wants to be proved?.... I dare say that without this great principle, one cannot prove the existence of God, nor account for many other important truths. . . . Has not everybody made use of this principle upon a thousand occasions?. . . . I have often defied people to allege an instance against that great principle, to bring any one uncontested example wherein it fails. But they have never done it, nor ever will. It is certain there is an infinite number of instances wherein it succeeds, or rather it succeeds in all the known cases in which it has been made use of. From

---

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, page 321.

whence one may reasonably judge that it will succeed also in unknown cases, or in such cases as can only by its means become known, according to the method of experimental philosophy which proceeds a posteriori, even if the principle were not otherwise justified by pure reason, or *a priori*.<sup>55</sup>

This is an interesting passage in that Leibniz argues that because the principle of sufficient reason is so widely confirmed in our experience, to arbitrarily call it into question in the case of unknown instances commits the fallacy of *special pleading*. The objector posits an exception to a widely confirmed principle without justification. Everyday experience, without exception, does not provide us with a violation of the principle. From this reason alone, Leibniz thinks it is reasonable to adopt a universal rule. Leibniz also poses a challenge to any gainsayers of the principle. Provide one uncontested example of where the principle has failed. Since one cannot, given the widespread success of the principle, one can at least provide an inductive case for the principle even if the self-evident justification of the principle were not available. Leibniz then ends with a comment indicating he thinks ultimately the principle could be defended by *reductio ad absurdum*.<sup>56</sup>

Christian Wolf was a staunch defender of defense of the principle of sufficient reason and his defense is well known:

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, page 346.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*. "To deny this great principle is to do as Epicurus did, who was reduced to deny that other great principle, namely, the principle of contradiction, which is that every intelligible enunciation must either be true or false. Chrysippus undertook to prove that principle against Epicurus, but I think I need not imitate him. I have already said what is sufficient to justify mine, and I might say something more upon it, but perhaps it would be too abstruse for this present dispute. And I believe reasonable and impartial men will grant me that having forced an adversary to deny that principle is reducing him *ad absurdum*."

Nothing exists without a sufficient reason for why it exists rather than does not exist. That is, if something is posited to exist, something must also be posited that explains why the first thing exists rather than does not exist. For either (i) nothing exists without a sufficient reason for why it exists rather than does not exist, or else (ii) something can exist without a sufficient reason for why it exists rather than does not exist (§53). Let us assume that some A exists without a sufficient reason for why it exists rather than does not exist. (§56) Therefore nothing is to be posited that explains why A exists. What is more, A is admitted to exist because nothing is assumed to exist: since this is absurd (§69), nothing exists without a sufficient reason; and if something is posited to exist, something else must be assumed that explains why that thing exists.<sup>57</sup>

This and similar passages in Wolff would later become the object of ridicule, contempt, and objection by later thinkers, most notably Kant.

David Hume, whose famous argument against the causal principle that “out of nothing, nothing comes” we will address later, nevertheless clarified his view in a letter he wrote to John Stewart in February 1754. Hume wrote that he did not think that you could prove the causal principle through induction or demonstration, but he still certainly believed in it and in fact thought that the denial of this principle was patently absurd:

---

<sup>57</sup> This citation is the translation into English that appears in the end notes to Kant's *Lectures on Metaphysics*, page 564. Although Kant was critical of this demonstration of the principle of sufficient reason (claiming that Wolff's argument is guilty of an equivocation of the term 'nothing,' one meaning the opposite of something and another meaning nothing as non-being), he nevertheless did seem to affirm that the principle was an innate first principle the human mind.

But allow me to tell you, that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as *that any thing might arise without a Cause*: I only maintain'd, that our Certainty of the Falshood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration; but from another Source. *That Caesar existed, that there is such an Island as Sicily*; for these Propositions, I affirm, we have no demonstrative nor intuitive Proof. Woud you infer that I deny their Truth, or even their Certainty? There are many different kinds of Certainty; and some of them as satisfactory to the Mind, tho perhaps not so regular, as the demonstrative kind.<sup>58</sup>

Kant's take on the particular version of the causal principle, that "Every event has a cause" is well known and needs little discussion here. In a rather famous passage he criticized Wolff's argument above, stating that Wolff equivocates on the term "nothing." But this did not mean that Kant did not accept the importance of the principle. He held the principle to be a *synthetic a priori* proposition; namely, it is a necessary, universal, and informative truth known independently from experience. Kant's questionable and perhaps disjointed epistemology, however, forced him to apply this principle only to phenomena and not to the things in themselves that lie underneath that reality.<sup>59</sup>

Kant did not get the last word on the matter. The Leibnizian philosopher Johann August Eberhard attacked Kant's criticism of Wolffian-Leibnizian metaphysics and argued that anything that was true and valuable in Kant's metaphysics was already contained in Leibniz's writings. Whether or not this is true overall is not a matter of concern here, but there is at least one contemporary Kant

---

<sup>58</sup> David Hume to John Stewart, February, 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1: 187.

<sup>59</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 189 / B 232; A 196 / B 241.

scholar who does recognize the importance of the principle of sufficient reason in Kant's philosophy and thus, his "debt to Leibniz":

Although not often mentioned by its name in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it would be hardly possible to overestimate the role that the principle of sufficient reason plays in Kant's new transcendental logic. That is why in acknowledging his debt to Leibniz in *On a Discovery* he mentioned this principle first. Even if not from Leibniz's point of view, Kant thought that the principle of sufficient reason was more important than the *Monadology*: it provided that backbone around which all the pieces of Kant's new metaphysics are gathered and in relation to which they obtained their meaning and validity.<sup>60</sup>

Schopenhauer's PhD dissertation of 1813, *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, critically looked at the natural tendency to view the world as understandable. Schopenhauer thought this idea pertained to four different areas: the principle of becoming, i.e., that an effect must follow from a cause; the principle of being, i.e., that sensible objects belong to time and space; the principle of knowing, viz., that conclusions follow from premises; and the principle of acting, viz., that actions follow from motives. With Schopenhauer, all versions of the

---

<sup>60</sup> Predrag Cicovacki, "Kant's Debt to Leibniz" in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. Graham Bird (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), page 86. Anthony Savile attributes Kant's acceptance of the principle of sufficient reason as an assumption of common sense: "Why should Leibniz have thought any such thing? What support can he offer for it? Reflecting on these questions sixty years after Leibniz's death, Kant observed that before his own consideration of the matter it was just an assumption of common sense. To deny it would be to accept the seeming absurdity that something can come from nothing: *ex nihilo aliquid!* Yet, even though we may suppose that to be a brute impossibility, reason requires that we should be able to say something to show why it is, just as we did in the case of the Principle of Contradiction." (Anthony Savile, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Leibniz and the Monadology* (New York: Routledge, 2000), page 34.

principle are understood to operate within a framework of Kantian epistemology, that is, the principle of sufficient reason, in whatever area, was only applicable to the phenomenal sphere.<sup>61</sup>

From 1750, many scholastics adopted the phrase “principle of sufficient reason” from Leibniz/Wolff, but without the epistemology of Kant.<sup>62</sup> One thinker, Benedict Stattler, went so far as to define philosophy in terms of the principle. Philosophy is, he says, “the science of sufficient reason of those things which are or become or are able to be or become.”<sup>63</sup> Similar to Aristotle, who said wisdom was causal knowledge of the world, Stattler’s definition of philosophy could be said to be knowing the sufficient reasons of the real and the possible.

Josef Wilhelm Kleutgen is another scholastic worthy of special mention. Kleutgen was instrumental in initiating the Scholastic/Thomistic revival of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and because he had been so imbibed with the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, he earned the nickname *Thomas redivivus* from his peers.<sup>64</sup> Pope Leo XIII was so enamored with his work that he called Kleutgen the “prince of philosophers,” and requested that he write the initial draft of the papal encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (which Kleutgen did). In spite of this strongly Thomistic and Scholastic background, Kleutgen did not hesitate to *publicly* credit Leibniz for having introduced the principle of sufficient reason into philosophy. It is not that the scholastics should be faulted for

---

<sup>61</sup> Perhaps due to Schopenhauer’s influence, later Ludwig Wittgenstein also thought that the principle of sufficient reason was an *a priori* insight: “All such propositions, including the principle of sufficient reason, the laws of continuity in nature and of least effort in nature, etc., etc. - all these are *a priori* insights about the forms in which the propositions of science can be cast.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 2001) page 81. And again: “Laws, like the principle of sufficient reason, etc. are about the net and not about what the net describes.” Wittgenstein, page 83, 6.35.

<sup>62</sup> See John Gurr, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Some Scholastic Systems, 1750-1900* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, June 1959).

<sup>63</sup> “*Recte itaque Philosophiam definimus esse scientiam rationis sufficientis eorum, quae sunt, vel fiunt, aut esse, fierique possunt.*” Benedict Stattler, (1728-1797), *Philosophia methodo scientiis propria explanata* (Augsburg: M. Rieger and Sons, 1769), page 72 I-1,2. Cited in Gurr, n. 22, page 57.

<sup>64</sup> Gerald McCool, *Catholic Theology In The 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), ch. 8.

an oversight, but rather, Kleutgen thinks Leibniz should be recognized for saying explicitly and with greater precision what the scholastics implicitly held under different formulations. (Kleutgen explicitly mentions “there is no effect without a cause,” as just one example).<sup>65</sup> Kleutgen also points out, as I have argued above, that although the scholastics did not specifically mention this principle; nevertheless, their whole Aristotelian theory of knowledge by causation depends upon it, as well as the doctrine of the four causes and the unification of essence and existence in God and its distinction amongst creation. What the principle really affirms, says Kleutgen, is *that all existing being either exists by itself or by something else*, and so it is important that we do not confuse *ratio* with *causa*. The principle of sufficient reason does not say that all things have a cause, only that all things have a reason. The difference is that the concept of *ratio*, unlike *causa*, does not imply production:

A being can be a principle or a sufficient reason without being a cause in the proper sense of the word, which supposes the production of a thing distinct from the agent-being. If then we understand these concepts: being and principle of sufficient reason in the sense explained, we cannot doubt the truth of the principle: every being has a sufficient reason.<sup>66</sup>

Tying this to the *ex nihilo* principle, Kleutgen says the judgment that everything exists by itself or by another can be expressed *negatively* by saying that *what is cannot exist from nothing*.

---

<sup>65</sup> Josef Wilhelm Kleutgen, *Die Philosophie Der Vorzeit* (Innsbruck: F. Rausch, 1878), vol. 1, page 459.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 474-5; cited in Gurr, page 131.

The Suarezian thinker, Juan José Urráburu, who received the honor of being invited to teach philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome from Pope Leo XIII, also briefly mentions and supports this principle. In his *Institutiones philosophicae quas Romae in Pontifica Universitate Gregoriana tradiderat*, Urráburu makes the distinction between the broader principle of sufficient reason and the more restricted principle of causality, noting an “indifference argument” similar to the one used by Avicenna, Aquinas, and Leibniz:

For if *ratio* be taken for the essence of a thing or to the determinant to existence, it is clearly evident that nothing can be without a suitable and proportionate essence, and nothing can exist unless there is something which determines its existence; otherwise it would be indifferent to existence and from indifference nothing follows.<sup>67</sup>

John Gurr presents a vast array of other scholastic philosophers, most of whom accept the principle, but argues that the systematic adoption of the principle of sufficient reason by these scholastics occurred in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Leibniz and Wolff began to exercise an important influence on Scholasticism. Gurr thinks these scholastic systems suffered as a result, since he perceives the principle of sufficient reason as presupposing a rationalism and flourishing in an “essentialist” context (where being is seen primarily as essence), but less valuable in systems (i.e., Thomistic) where being is seen as the act of existence. Gurr is hostile to

---

<sup>67</sup> Juan José Urráburu, *Institutiones philosophicae quas Romae in Pontifica Universitate Gregoriana tradiderat* (Valladolid: Typis Viduae ac Filiorum, 1891, II, 1101), cited in Gurr, page 151.

the principle as commonly used for these reasons, but appears to be open to other formulations “as would be acceptable to perennial Scholasticism.”<sup>68</sup>

Space does not permit a full discussion of Gurr's work here, but a few brief remarks will help justify my approach, since the present essay itself makes heavy use of scholastic and Thomistic style argumentation. First, Gurr is wrong that the principle of sufficient reason is an inherently antithetical notion to an authentic Thomism. One indication of this should be that the adoption of the principle of sufficient reason by post-19<sup>th</sup> century Thomists is considerable. In fact, the list of names of prominent Thomists who have *explicitly* accepted the principle of sufficient reason include Maurice De Wulf,<sup>69</sup> John Rickaby,<sup>70</sup> H. Gardeil,<sup>71</sup> Reginald Garrigou Lagrange,<sup>72</sup> Fredrick Copleston,<sup>73</sup> Joseph Gredt,<sup>74</sup> Jacques Maritain,<sup>75</sup> Etienne Gilson,<sup>76</sup> Bernard Lonergan,<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, page 7, n. 3.

<sup>69</sup> The Thomist philosopher Maurice De Wulf held that all change and causality was “demanded by the principle of sufficient reason - an absolute principle to which all that is must be obedient, under penalty of not being at all. To deny this sort of preexistence is equivalent to denying change from one state to another, the evolution of reality.” Maurice de Wulf, *Philosophy and Civilization in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1922), page 200.

<sup>70</sup> “To compile a catalogue of all the truths which are self-evident, and cannot be reduced to components simpler than themselves, would be a tedious work, and not helpful to present purposes. If, however, we are called upon to emphasize any beyond the three mentioned primaries, it will be the Principle of Sufficient Reason, so often violated by pure empiricists, and yet so vital to all philosophy.” John Rickaby, *The First Principles of Knowledge* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1919), page 175.

<sup>71</sup> “If being is intelligible, there must be a ground for its intelligibility. This ground is precisely its ‘sufficient reason,’ that which both determines being to be and renders it intelligible. Every being, accordingly, is intelligible because for every being there is a sufficient reason, something that adequately accounts for what it is or has.” H.D. Gardeil OP, *Introduction to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas: IV. Metaphysics*, tr. John Otto (St Louis, MO: Herder Book Co., 1967), page 140.

<sup>72</sup> The principle of sufficient reason is the immediate basis of the proofs for the existence of God. By the appeal to the impossible it resolves itself into the principle of identity. In this sense, it is an analytic principle....The principle of sufficient reason may be expressed by the following formula: “Everything which is, has a sufficient reason for existing,” or “Every being has a sufficient reason”....This principle is self-evident, and though it cannot be directly demonstrated, it can be indirectly demonstrated by the indirect method of proof known as *reductio ad absurdum*.” (Garrigou Lagrange, Reginald *God: His Existence and His Nature I*, tr. Dom Bede Rose (St Louis, MO: Herder Book Co., 1934), page 181.

<sup>73</sup> This judgment is based on his BBC debate with Bertrand Russell, BBC Radio Third Programme Recording, January 28 1948.

<sup>74</sup> *Etiam principium rationis sufficientis: “Nihil est sine ratione sufficiente”, est principium per se notum omnibus....principium rationis sufficientis et principium causalitatis reducuntur ad principium contradictionis.”* Iosepho Gredt, *Elementa Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomisticae, ii* (Friburgi: Herder and Company, 1937), para.749, 5 page 151, emphasis mine.

Norris Clarke,<sup>78</sup> Mortimer Adler,<sup>79</sup> Raymond Dennehey,<sup>80</sup> and many others, most of whom would not for a moment consider themselves an “essentialist” in metaphysics or a rationalist in

---

<sup>75</sup> “This principle has a far more general scope and significance than the principle of causality. For the principle of sufficient reason is exemplified in cases in which the efficient cause plays no part. For instance, man's rationality is the ground, the sufficient reason of his risibilitas and docilitas. Similarly, the essence of the triangle is the ground of its properties, and there is no difference of being, no real distinction between the properties of the triangle and its essence. Again God's essence is the ground of His existence, He exists a se, He is Himself the sufficient reason of His esse, the ground of His existence, since His essence is precisely to exist.” (Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939) page 99). Also: “At a later stage we can reduce, or rather logically attach, the principle of sufficient reason to the principle of identity, by a *reductio ad absurdum*. This is a reflex operation which may, for example, be described compendiously as follows. The expression in virtue of which, when we say that in virtue of which an object is, must have a meaning or be meaningless. If it is meaningless philosophy is futile, for philosophers look for a sufficient ground of things. If, on the other hand, it has a meaning it is evident that in virtue of the principle of non-contradiction, it is identical with the meaning of the phrase that without which an object is not. If, therefore, anything exists which has no sufficient reason for its existence, that is to say which has neither in itself nor in something else, that in virtue of which it is, this object exists and does not exist at the same time. It does not exist because it lacks that without which it does not exist. This *reductio ad absurdum* proves that to deny the principle of sufficient reason is to deny the principle of identity. But the proof is a product of reflection. The original manifestation, spontaneous and intuitive, of the principle of sufficient reason is as I have described it above.” (*Ibid*, page 101).

<sup>76</sup> Because of its lack of a textual basis in the writings of St. Thomas, Gilson was reluctant to affirm the phrase “principle of sufficient reason,” yet would still write in “Les Principes et les causes” (*Revue Thomiste* 52: 1, pp. 47-8): “A philosopher whom St. Thomas could not have foreseen, Leibniz, later affirmed that there are two first principles, one for necessary truths - the principle of contradiction - and the other for contingent truths - the principle of sufficient reason. For Thomists, what is one to do with this second first principle? Some suggest formulating it as follows: 'Nothing exists without sufficient reason.' In that case it means this: for something to exist in the world rather than not exist, and for it to exist in a given manner rather than in some other manner, there must be a cause that determines whether it exists or does not exist, and exists in this way rather than otherwise. Two reflections now suggest themselves. First of all, this principle cannot be held to be an absolutely first principle. Indeed if nothing determines that something exist rather than not exist, or be as it is rather than otherwise, then it is possible for that thing both to be and not to be at the same time that which it is and something else. Since this would be contradictory, one can say that the formula of the principle of sufficient reason leads back to the principle of contradiction. Secondly, and for the same reason, this principle is valid for necessary truths not less than for contingent truths. Thus it is not necessary that man exist, but if he does exist it is held to be necessary that he be endowed with reason and, consequently, since God is infinitely wise everything has been ordered by His thought, and wherever there is order there is reason. This means that there are sufficient reasons for things necessary just as there are for things contingent. Hence the conclusion: 'The principle of sufficient reason is true, and it is valid not only for contingent truths but also for necessary truths, so that it must be held to be their principle, but not their first principle.’” Cited in Desmond Fitzgerald’s “Gilson and Maritain on the Principle of Sufficient Reason” in *Jacques Maritain and the Many Ways of Knowing*, ed. Douglas A. Ollivant (Catholic University of America-Press: Washington DC, 2002), pp. 120-127.

<sup>77</sup> Lonergan affirms an common alternative formulation of the principle, namely that “the real is completely intelligible.” Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1992), page 672.

<sup>78</sup> “...It seems to me that this general Principle of Sufficient Reason is a quite legitimate development of Thomism, with the advantage of summing up in one basic formula the principle of the intelligibility of being that is implied in all of Thomas's specialized formulas of the Principle of Causality.” (Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), page 181. All advance in thought to infer the existence of some new being from what we already know depends upon this principle [of sufficient reason]. The ancient and medieval thinkers, including St. Thomas, did not formulate the principle in these explicit terms, but simply included it under the general affirmation of the intelligibility of being. ...But many modern Thomists welcome the explicit formulation we have given above [“Every being has a sufficient reason for its existence either in itself or in another”], as do I, because of its convenience as the most all-inclusive expression of the dynamic intelligibility of being as distinct from the static principle [PNC], and one that all realist metaphysicians use constantly, whether they describe it in this way or not. (*Ibid*, page 20). Clarke thinks however this is distinct from a Leibnizian predictive version that looks forward and can deduce the existence of an effect by rational necessity. Thomas' use, thinks Clarke, does not deduce effects from causes but traces effects back to a sufficient reason or adequate cause.

epistemology.<sup>81</sup> In fact, if the Thomist Norman Kretzman is right in saying that “Every cosmological argument depends on some version of the principle of sufficient reason,”<sup>82</sup> then *all Thomists*, whether they explicitly admit it or not, require this principle as an essential element to their philosophical worldview. Moreover, as we will see later, an important formulation of the principle of sufficient reason is as such: “Whatever exists has a reason for its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other being,” which is clearly a Thomistic doctrine. One may debate about how St. Thomas comes to know that “*Whatever exists has a reason for its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other being*,” but what is not up for debate and what one cannot deny is that *St. Thomas at least thinks that statement is true*. A reason, as we will discuss in more detail in

---

<sup>79</sup> “What does not have a *raison d’être* or a cause of its existence in itself, trembles on the verge of nothingness. Only if some cause exists and operates to preserve it in existence is it saved from annihilation, or being reduced to nothingness.” (Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Think About God* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 117-118.

<sup>80</sup> “For to affirm the existence of things and at the same time to deny that they require a sufficient reason is to do violence to reason. That which lacks a sufficient reason for its existence cannot be: it would both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect; it would therefore be nothing at all. Thus the principle, “It is impossible for a being to be and not be at the same time and in the same respect” leads to the principle of sufficient reason: “Every being has the reason for its being either in itself or in some being outside itself.” And this principle leads in turn to the principle of causality: “Every being that does not have the sufficient reason for its being in itself is caused by another.” (Raymond Denney, “The Ontological Basis of Certitude,” *The Thomist*, vol. 50, No. 1, January 1986), page 131.

<sup>81</sup> Gurr actually makes the claim that many of these Thomists of the Thomistic revival went to the manuals of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit and Franciscans thinkers (whom Gurr claims were the ones responsible for incorporating Leibnizian and Wolffian rationalism into scholasticism) in order to get their Thomistic material - and in doing so unknowingly drank in Leibnizian and Wolffian waters! “It was inevitable that many of the authors of the Thomistic revival, in their lack of contact with a tradition really stemming from St. Thomas himself, credited the rationalistic manuals of the late eighteenth century with a Thomistic content and meaning. . . . [The revival Thomists] decided that the Wolffian manuals such as we have examined in this chapter were reliable guides in the perennial task of Scholastic philosophy itself. . . . In thus reading St. Thomas into a framework furnished by rationalism seemed to be the hand of Aquinas, but the voice was that of Wolff, and for many years this synthetic product received the blessing intended for the great original.” (Gurr, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Some Scholastic Systems*, page 90.) What makes Gurr's position more implausible is that he thinks Pope Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* was an attempt to rescue Catholic philosophy from this nineteenth century “rationalism,” but does not address the fact that Kleutgen (himself a supporter of the principle of sufficient reason, and one who explicitly gives credit to Leibniz) is frequently credited to be the primary author of that very encyclical! Finally, to compound the error, Gurr's regret over the prevalent acceptance of the principle of sufficient reason at the time of his writing (1959) forces him to seek a villain responsible for this mix-up, and he decides to lay the blame at the feet of the “rationalist” Garrigou Lagrange, without, even for a moment, pointing the finger at another much more influential champion of the principle, namely Pope Pius XII! (*Ibid*, page 158).

<sup>82</sup> Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), page 80. Kretzmann himself is another Thomist who subscribes to a version of the principle of sufficient reason which he thinks, as I have said here, is fundamental not only for science but for all rational thought. “I subscribe to PSR2 (‘Every existing thing has a reason for its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other beings’) interpreting the expression ‘a reason for its existence’ in the sense of a reason for its presently existing. Not only the history of science, but even a fundamentally rational attitude towards ordinary reality, presupposes PSR2.” (*Ibid*, page 107.)

Chapter Three, is simply that which accounts for the existence of something. There is no being in the Thomistic universe that does not have a reason for its existence; there is only God (who exists from the necessity of His own nature) and everything else (which exists because of the causal efficacy of something else). So not only do numerous Thomists hold it to be true, but it seems that even Aquinas himself holds to a very strong formulation of it. Second, just because the *phrase* “principle of sufficient reason” came from German rationalism, that does not mean that rationalism is the only context in which the principle can function, nor does it mean that the principle does not accurately depict the metaphysical situation.<sup>83</sup> To Gurr's credit, he seems to recognize the important distinction between the *phrase* and the *concept* of the principle of sufficient reason (in his words, the *notion* of sufficient reason and the *principle* of sufficient reason). It seems true that the *phrase* “principle of sufficient reason” was adopted by the scholastics from German rationalism, but this, of course, does not mean the *concept* of sufficient reason was so adopted, nor that the principle can only function within a rationalistic system. As we have seen and I will continue to argue, the principle of sufficient reason is a fundamental principle to all philosophy, for it belongs to the philosophical enterprise to *explain*. The only way something can be explained is if it is *explainable*. Thus, the principle of sufficient reason is inherently wrapped up with the human mind seeking understanding, and is not traceable to any particular school of thought or geographical area. Nor should we forget that even Pope Pius XII, a friend of Thomism and scholasticism, to be sure, saw the importance of this issue. He remarked that the Catholic Church holds human reason in high esteem, and can only perform its important functions well when “imbued with that sound philosophy” acknowledged and accepted by the

---

<sup>83</sup> Other recent scholastics, such as Joseph Owens and John F.X. Knasas, defend the principle by understanding the initiated thing as acquiring some kind of accident. Since an accident is *ipso facto* dependent, the need for explanation is provoked. See Joseph Owens, “The Causal Proposition - Principle or Conclusion,” *The Modern Schoolman*, 32(4), 1955, pp. 323-39. For John F. X. Knasas’ discussion of causality from the accidental, see *Being and Some 20<sup>th</sup> Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press; 2003), Ch. 6.

Church, a philosophy that safeguards, among other things, “*the unshakable metaphysical principles of sufficient reason, causality, and finality.*”<sup>84</sup> The Pope seems to be saying that without the safeguarding of the principle of sufficient reason and other principles, human reason is unable to perform crucial functions. For these reasons, scholastics and Thomists need not shy away from using *both the notion and the actual phrase* “principle of sufficient reason.”<sup>85</sup> Just as Aristotle provided the scholastics with terms such as act and potency to capture a real ontological situation, I see no reason why Leibniz too cannot provide scholastics with a basic formula and phrase that sum up all of the assumptions about the intelligibility of the world and the more specialized formulations of the principle of causality.

This historical overview is sufficient to help the reader grasp both the widespread nature of the issue and its fundamental importance. It is immaterial whether the principle is implicit or explicit; it makes no difference if you phrase it in terms of “the principle of determination” like the Arabic scholastics, the *ex nihilo nihil fit* of Aquinas and Descartes, the *a nullo nihil potest esse* of Scotus, or the *principle of sufficient reason* of Leibniz or Wolff. As we will later see, all of these various formulations presuppose at least some version of the principle of sufficient reason, and without such presuppositions, the philosophical enterprise is a truly crippled and hopeless endeavor.

---

<sup>84</sup> Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (1950), 29.

<sup>85</sup> To mention three more flaws in Gurr's work: 1) Apart from “essentialist” and “rationalist” assertions, there is little in the way of argument to support Gurr's impatience with the principle and there is hardly any response to arguments in favor of it. 2) He seems to focus on the works that explicitly contain the phrase “principle of sufficient reason,” and not the negative formulation “out of nothing nothing comes” (or some equivalent). Such an oversight is considerable if it is true (as I and many others say) that the two formulations are metaphysically equivalent. 3) Gurr does not ask important questions about common scholastic principles and methods (like the *agere sequitur* principle discussed above) and how they function without covertly presupposing the principle of sufficient reason. Without delving into these deeper issues, Gurr's work is a veneer historical overview that lacks any deep philosophical significance.

## THE NEED FOR A DEFENSE OF THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

The principal aim of this essay, however, is not to determine the historical pedigree of an idea. Here we are concerned with a single question; namely, *what good reasons are there for thinking the principle of sufficient reason is true?*<sup>86</sup> This all-important question must be handled by arguments and not historical surveys. Given the above, I hope it is clear that this question is of fundamental importance to philosophy.

Many laypeople will find this purpose silly. Our metaphysical intuitions tell us that of course, something cannot be caused or determined by nothing. Almost all of our day-to-day actions presuppose that something cannot come to be from nothing. We hear a knock on the door and seek to see who is doing the knocking. We get sick and wonder where we caught the disease. Everyday life is literally inundated with causal inferences. On this score, the layperson has a good point; the principle of sufficient reason certainly enjoys a tremendous amount of intuitive plausibility.

Yet a defense of the “obvious” has never been anathema in philosophy. Aristotle devoted a significant amount of time into defending the principle of non-contradiction, while Chrysippus is said to have written an entire book on the topic.<sup>87</sup> These efforts are not misguided. A sound

---

<sup>86</sup> The question itself may seem a bit paradoxical. To give reasons for the principle of reasons sounds impossible without circularity. But a similar problem could be said to occur for those who ask for a reason for accepting the principle of reasons. In order for this discussion to get off the ground, these initial objections on both sides need to be clarified. More precisely, we want to know this: what *good* reasons are there for thinking this principle could be said to be true and reflective of reality other than just a vain hope for answers? To put it another way: are there good reasons for thinking the principle of sufficient reason is not only a principle of thought, but also a principle of reality? Stated this way, the circularity dissolves for both parties.

<sup>87</sup> Chrysippus' work, mentioned by philosophers, is now lost.

philosophy attempts to explain “the obvious.” A defense of the principle of sufficient reason is important because a defense of first principles is important.<sup>88</sup>

It would seem that given the foundational nature of this principle and the immense section of our knowledge and methodology that hangs in the balance, there would be much literature on this subject. This inference, however, would be sorely mistaken. As far as I can tell, while a large majority of philosophers have made use of causal inferences (and by the same token, have used the principle of sufficient reason as a foundation for those inferences), very few have ever devoted more than a paragraph or two defending that principle.<sup>89</sup>

In my view, this topic is of such a weighty importance; it deserves a full-length treatment. The structure of the remainder of this thesis follows the order of a scholastic article. We will first cover objections to the principle. Next, we will explain the meaning and nature of the principle, followed by arguments in favor of the principle of sufficient reason. Finally, I will close with a reply to the objections.

---

<sup>88</sup> For example, Aristotle thought it important to say some words in the defense of the principle of non-contradiction (*Meta* IV), which is arguably the most patently true principle of all.

<sup>89</sup> The largest treatment of defending the principle to date is Alexander R. Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Another relatively extensive defense is Reginald Garrigou Lagrange's *God: His Existence and His Nature I*, tr. Dom Bede Rose (St Louis, MO: Herder Book Co., 1934), pp. 111-232. However, the topics discussed there are broader than strictly defending the principle of sufficient reason.