



# No Easy Road To PSR

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## No Easy Road to PSR

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Leibniz has proposed an argument for the so-called Principle of the Sufficient Reason (PSR) which goes as follows:

*Proposition.* Nothing is without a reason, or whatever is has a sufficient reason.

*Definition 1.* A sufficient reason is that which is such that if it is posited, then the thing is.

*Definition 2.* A requisite is that which is such that if it is not posited, then the thing is not.

*Demonstration:*

(1) What is has all [its] requisites.

For if one [of them] is not posited, then the thing is not (by *Def. 2*).

(2) If the requisites of a thing have all been posited, then the thing is.

For if it is not, it will be kept from being by the lack of something, that is, a requisite.

(3) Therefore, all the requisites are a sufficient reason by *Def. 1*.

(4) Therefore, whatever is has a sufficient reason.”<sup>1</sup>

Two immediate objections can be raised against this argument. First, one might complain that we cannot validly conclude (4) from (3) unless we first establish that every existent has at least one requisite for its existence. Second, and perhaps more challengingly, one might complain that the argument is question-begging because (2) presupposes PSR. It might be said that one thing can fail to exist not for being kept from being by the lack of something, but rather for no reason. To presuppose the falsity of this possibility is to take PSR for granted. Therefore, the argument begs the question of whether PSR is true.

To defend this argument against these objections Michael Della Rocca, in a recent article, has argued that, for every  $x$ , a requisite of  $x$ 's existence is the following<sup>2</sup>:

(R1)  $x$  does not brutally fail to exist.

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<sup>1</sup> This translation is borrowed from p. 221 of Michael Della Rocca, “A New Defense of the Principle of Sufficient Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy*, CXX (2023): 220–227. Brackets are in original.

<sup>2</sup> Della Rocca, “A New Defence,” *op. cit.*

If his argument succeeds, both of the above objections are repelled. On the one hand, every  $x$  has at least one requisite—i.e.,  $R_1$ —for its existence. Thus, the first objection is responded to. On the other hand, (2) can be justified without appealing to PSR. Assume by reductio that (2) is false. This means that there is an  $x$  such that although all the requisites of  $x$ 's existence are posited,  $x$  does not exist. Since  $R_1$  is one of the requisites of  $x$ 's existence,  $R_1$  is by assumption is posited. This means that if  $x$  does not exist, its non-existence is not brute and must be due to the lack of something. That thing whose lack has kept  $x$  from being is (by *Def. 2*) a requisite of  $x$ 's existence. Therefore, it is not the case that all the requisites of  $x$ 's existence are posited. Contradiction. Therefore, the reductio assumption must be rejected. (2) is true. Thus, the second objection is repelled as well.

Note that  $R_1$  differs from the following claim:

( $R_2$ )  $x$  does not fail to exist (that is,  $x$  exists).

Taking  $R_2$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence would trivialise (2).<sup>3</sup> Della Rocca does not assume that  $R_2$  is a requisite of  $x$ 's existence. By contrast with  $R_2$ ,  $R_1$  is not a trivial requisite of  $x$ 's existence. He does not take  $x$ 's existence as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence. More importantly, Della Rocca insists that taking  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence is compatible with both the brute existence of  $x$  and the brute non-existence of  $x$ . So, by taking  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence, Della Rocca does not assume the truth of PSR, or so he claims: "It is compatible with seeing  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence that  $x$  exists brutally. It is even compatible with seeing  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence that  $x$  brutally fails to exist, and thus it is compatible with seeing  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$  that  $R_1$  is false."<sup>4</sup>

$R_1$  is a negative fact. One might be worried that "including  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence is implausible in much the same way that it is implausible to say that an existence fact has as a requisite a negative fact."<sup>5</sup> To respond to this worry, Della Rocca argues that "negative facts can have explanatory value or be requisites for other facts. For example, take the fact  $p$  that there are no dinosaurs alive today. Now consider the disjunctive fact that  $p$  or  $q$  (where  $q$  is any fact whatsoever). The disjunctive fact is explained by whichever of  $p$  or  $q$  obtains, and thus in this case the fact that  $p$  or  $q$  is explained by the negative fact  $p$ . Thus, negative facts can have explanatory value and can be requisites for other facts."<sup>6</sup> As another example, he contends that one's not being murdered last night is certainly a requisite of her existence today.<sup>7</sup>

Although Della Rocca's move is indeed ingenious, it seems to me that it eventually fails. Consider the following fact:

( $R_1^*$ )  $x$  does not non-brutely fail to exist.

If we are justified to take  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence, we will also be justified to take  $R_1^*$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence. On its own, taking  $R_1^*$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence does not trivialise (2). Even if this requisite is posited,  $x$  still may fail to exist. Indeed, taking  $R_1^*$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence is compatible with both brute existence and non-existence of  $x$ . It is also compatible with

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<sup>3</sup> Della Rocca, "A New Defence," *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>4</sup> Della Rocca, "A New Defence," *op. cit.*, p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> Della Rocca, "A New Defence," *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>6</sup> Della Rocca, "A New Defence," *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>7</sup> Della Rocca, "A New Defence," *op. cit.*, p. 223–224.

both non-brute existence and non-existence of  $x$ . In particular, if  $x$  fails to exist for some sufficient reason, a requisite of  $x$ 's existence—i.e.,  $R_1^*$ —is not posited. Therefore, it should not exist. No incompatibility would arise. Thus, it seems that if taking  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence is justified, so is taking  $R_1^*$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence. These two requisites seem to be on a par.

Now note that, given *Def. 1*, the conjunction of  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  would be a sufficient reason for the existence of  $x$ . If both  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  are posited then,  $x$  does not either brutally or non-brutely fail to exist. Thus,  $x$  does not fail to exist at all. Equivalently, if both  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  are posited, then  $x$  exists. As a result, it seems that a sufficient reason for any existing  $x$ —regardless of what and how it is—is the conjunction of  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$ .

No one would welcome this result. The conjunction of  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  is nothing but a *trivial* requisite of  $x$ 's existence and a trivial sufficient reason for  $x$ 's existence. Indeed, although neither taking  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence nor taking  $R_1^*$  as a requisite of it trivialises (2), taking both of them as requisites of  $x$ 's existence would trivialise (2). To avoid this conclusion, we have to deny that both  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  are real and non-trivial requisites of  $x$ 's existence. But there seems to be no *non-ad hoc* justification for keeping  $R_1$  and ruling out  $R_1^*$ . At least, Della Rocca has not provided a ground for making such a distinction. Therefore, neither  $R_1$  nor  $R_1^*$  should be considered a viable requisite of  $x$ 's existence. But if  $R_1$  is not a legitimate requisite of  $x$ 's existence, then Della Rocca's new argument for PSR fails.

As an attempt to show that  $R_1$  is indeed more viable a requisite of  $x$ 's existence than  $R_1^*$ , one might argue as follows: There is a symmetry breaker between  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$ . If  $R_1$  is a requisite of  $x$ 's existence but  $R_1^*$  is not, then the assumption that all the requisites of  $x$ 's existence are posited still implies the existence of  $x$ . By contrast, if  $R_1^*$  is a requisite of  $x$ 's existence but  $R_1$  is not, the existence of  $x$  cannot be concluded from the mere assumption that all the requisites of  $x$ 's existence are posited. This shows that, unlike  $R_1^*$ ,  $R_1$  is a real requisite of  $x$ 's existence and should not be excluded, or so an objector to my argument might say.

However, I do not think that this move is tenable. It is true that if we accept that  $R_1$  is a requisite and  $R_1^*$  is not, we can justify (2) without begging the question. It is also true that if we accept that  $R_1^*$  is a requisite but  $R_1$  is not, we cannot justify (2) without either begging the question or at least adding further assumptions. But this difference, on its own, does not show that  $R_1$  is a more viable requisite than  $R_1^*$ . Metaphorically speaking, compared to  $R_1^*$ ,  $R_1$  has a more influential contribution in guaranteeing the existence of  $x$ . But this does not make  $R_1$  a more viable requisite than  $R_1^*$ . By *Def. 2*, a requisite of  $x$ 's existence is what whose absence implies the non-existence of  $x$ . In this regard,  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  are on a par. They both fit *Def. 2*. The aforementioned difference between  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  is irrelevant to their being a legitimate requisite of  $x$ 's existence. The relevant symmetry between them is not broken.

To anticipate and rebut a couple of other complaints about my criticism of Della Rocca's argument, let me first put my objection differently: As it is accepted by Della Rocca,  $R_2$  is a trivial requisite of  $x$ 's existence. More precisely, taking  $R_2$  as a requisite of  $x$ 's existence trivialises (2). Now note that it is trivially true that if  $x$  fails to exist, it either brutally or non-brutely fails to exist. Thus,  $R_2$  is equivalent to  $R_3$ :

(R<sub>3</sub>)  $x$  does not either brutally or non-brutely fail to exist.

$R_3$  is itself equivalent to the conjunction of  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$ . Thus,  $R_2$ ,  $R_3$ , and  $R_1 \& R_1^*$  are all equivalent to each other. Since  $R_2$  is a trivial requisite of  $x$ 's existence,  $R_3$  and  $R_1 \& R_1^*$  must similarly be trivial requisites of  $x$ 's existence. But if both  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  are untrivial requisites of  $x$ 's existence, then their conjunction must similarly be an untrivial requisite of  $x$ 's existence. By *modus tollens*, at least one of  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  is not an untrivial requisite of  $x$ 's existence. But since  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  are on a par and none of them is more viable a requisite of  $x$ 's existence than the other, we have to conclude that none of them can be accepted as an untrivial requisite of  $x$ 's existence. But if  $R_1$  is not an untrivial requisite of  $x$ 's existence, then Della Rocca's argument fails.

To block this argument, one might argue that it is in principle possible that the conjunction of some *untrivial* requisites of  $x$ 's existence form a *trivial* requisite of  $x$ 's existence. If this is true, then the triviality of  $R_1 \& R_1^*$  does not imply the triviality of at least one of its conjuncts (i.e.,  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$ ). This makes my criticism invalid. However, this proposal raises another problem for Della Rocca's argument. If we accept this proposal, then all the requisites of  $x$ 's existence might collectively trivialise  $x$ 's existence even if neither of these requisites on its own trivialises  $x$ 's existence. This means that if we accept the proposed idea, all the requisites of  $x$ 's existence might be nothing but only a *trivial* sufficient reason for its existence. Thus, Della Rocca's argument would at best prove the existence of a sufficient reason that might or might not be trivial. His argument, therefore, does not necessarily establish the existence of an untrivial sufficient reason. Although this proposal refutes my criticism, it takes me to the final target—i.e., refuting the new argument for PSR—through a different path.

As another objection, one might say that although  $R_2$  entail  $R_1 \& R_1^*$ , the triviality of the former is not transferred to the latter. This is because, one might argue, the triviality of requisites is not closed under logical entailment. It can then be insisted that  $R_1 \& R_1^*$  is both an untrivial requisite of  $x$ 's existence and an untrivial sufficient reason for it. To respond to this objection, two points can be made. First, if this line of reasoning is sound, then a sufficient reason for the existence of anything, no matter what and how it is, would be that it does not either brutally or non-brutely fail to exist. But even if the PSR-defenders take this *universal* sufficient reason to be untrivial and insist that we can explain the existence of everything by this sufficient reason, the PSR-sceptics would say that what they mean by a sufficient reason is something more substantial. This makes the disagreement between the two sides somehow verbal. PSR-sceptics would obviously accept that if  $x$  does not either brutally or non-brutely fail to exist, then  $x$  exists. But they would not take the antecedent of this conditional as a sufficient reason for  $x$ 's existence.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, we should note that the relation between  $R_2$  and  $R_1 \& R_1^*$  is not merely that the former entails the latter. Rather, they are indeed equivalent. They express the same fact. Thus, if one wants to take one of them as trivial and the other as untrivial, then one should show that the concept of *being-a-trivial-requisite* is opaque. A concept  $F$  is opaque if and only if  $F(b)$  cannot be validly concluded from  $a=b$  and  $F(a)$ . But almost all the familiar examples of opaque concepts (e.g., *belief*, *knowledge*, *internalist justification*, etc.) have a subjective element (aspect or component). However, it does not seem that any subjective element is involved in the concept of *being-a-trivial-requisite*. The (un)triviality of a requisite should not depend on how it looks to a subject. But, for the sake of argument, assume that *being-a-trivial-requisite* is indeed an opaque concept that might be true of something but not of all its logical equivalents. This means that in some, but not necessarily all, cases two logically equivalent requisites might have different

statuses in terms of being a trivial requisite. Thus, we still need to explain why in particular  $R_2$  and  $R_1 \& R_1^*$  can have different statuses in terms of being a trivial requisite.  $R_2$  and  $R_1 \& R_1^*$  do not even *seem* to be expressing different facts. Nor do they even *seem* to be conveying different pieces of information (in the sense that, for example, ‘George Orwell is George Orwell’ and ‘Eric Blair is George Orwell’ might do). If one is presented with  $R_2$  and  $R_1 \& R_1^*$ , one can by no means fail to see that they are logically equivalent. Thus, there seems to be no reason to think that they can have different statuses in terms of triviality, even if *being-a-trivial-requisite* is in general an opaque concept. To see how weak the latter manoeuvre against my argument is, consider the following attempt to justify (2):

(2) is true because, for every  $x$ ,  $R_2$  is an untrivial requisite of  $x$ ’s existence. If all the requisites of  $x$ ’s existence are posited, then  $R_2$  must be posited as well. But if  $R_2$  is posited,  $x$  does not fail to exist. This establishes that  $x$  exists. Thus, for every  $x$ , if all the requisites of  $x$ ’s existence are posited, then  $x$  exists. This means that (2) is true. You might think that  $R_2$  is a trivial requisite of  $x$ ’s existence because it is equivalent to  $R_4$ :

(R4)  $x$  exists.

Admittedly,  $R_4$  is a trivial requisite of  $x$ ’s existence. Moreover, there is no doubt that  $R_4$  is equivalent to  $R_2$ . But the concept of *being-a-logical-equivalent* is opaque. Therefore, from the triviality of  $R_4$  as a requisite of  $x$ ’s existence we cannot conclude the triviality of its logical equivalents.  $R_2$  is indeed an untrivial requisite.

Undoubtedly, this justification is implausible. If one is presented with  $R_4$  and  $R_2$ , one can by no means fail to see that they are logically equivalent. They do not even *seem* to be expressing different facts. Nor do they even *seem* to be conveying different pieces of information. Thus,  $R_2$  is as trivial as  $R_4$  even if *being-a-trivial-requisite* is in general an opaque concept. For exactly the same reason, the strategy of appealing to the opacity of *being-a-trivial-requisite* fails to establish that  $R_1 \& R_1^*$  is untrivial (or less trivial than  $R_2$ ). Therefore, this move seems to be no less unpromising than the others in blocking my objection to the new argument for PSR.

In sum, to make Leibniz’s argument work, Della Rocca suggests that  $R_1$  must be taken as a requisite of  $x$ ’s existence. To justify that  $R_1$  is indeed a requisite of  $x$ ’s existence, it is shown in his paper that (a)  $R_1$  accords with *Def. 1*, (b) taking  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ ’s existence does not trivialise (2), and (c) taking  $R_1$  as a requisite of  $x$ ’s existence is compatible with all the cases of brute or non-brute existence or non-existence of  $x$ . But all of these are also true of  $R_1^*$ . Thus, if  $R_1$  is a viable requisite of  $x$ ’s existence, so is  $R_1^*$ . However, we cannot take both  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  as untrivial requisites of  $x$ ’s existence. Otherwise, an untrivial sufficient reason for the existence of any existence  $x$ —no matter what and how  $x$  is—would be the conjunction of  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$ . But this is absurd. Thus, we cannot take both  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  as untrivial requisites of  $x$ ’s existence. Moreover, there seems to be no reason for keeping one of them and excluding the other. Therefore, preserving everything else as it is, none of  $R_1$  and  $R_1^*$  should be considered an untrivial requisite of  $x$ ’s existence. If so, the justification offered for (2) loses its plausibility and the new argument for PSR fails.

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