On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason – Arthur Schopenhauer

“Nothing is without a reason for its being.” This is the way Christian Wolff defines the principle of sufficient reason and is the definition that Schopenhauer adopts in his doctoral thesis regarding the same subject. Schopenhauer uses this thesis as an introduction to his much broader philosophical system which he expounds in his later *World as Will and Representation*. In the *Fourfold Root,* Schopenhauer sets out to clarify what he sees as a grave error underlying metaphysical thinking in his time, namely the misconceptions surrounding the principle of sufficient reason. Following on closely from Kant’s philosophy, he proceeds to outline a clear and accessible approach to this important metaphysical tenet.

Schopenhauer starts his investigation by analysing the views of the leading philosophers surrounding the principle of sufficient reason. From Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Schopenhauer isolates the errors in their conceptions. In this section, he focuses largely on the confusion that has been generated between reasons and causes. He argues that while some philosophers before him have noticed the distinction, none have fully appreciated it and consistently applied it in their teachings.

In this section, Schopenhauer also attacks the Ontological argument for the existence of God, pointing out that Aristotle himself precluded this argument when he said that defining a thing and proving its existence are totally different things. He quotes Aristotle as saying that, “Existence never can belong to the essence of a thing.” For his own contribution, Schopenhauer resorts to commonsense adding that a conception based on experience needs no proof of its existence because this fact is obvious. On the other hand, if the proposed Object has its source in your mind then all of the predicates in the world won’t help it for “it is a mere phantasm.”

Schopenhauer moves on to outline the general conception of the principle of sufficient reason as expressing the way all our representations (that is Objects to our Subject) stand in connection to each other, so that nothing standing independent and detached can become an Object for us. It stresses a complex world where everything is connected to everything else through reason. An Object, A, that is the reason for another Object, B, also has another Object, C, as its reason and so the web extends to a limitless number of Objects.

As the title suggests, Schopenhauer wishes to divide the PSR into four distinct categories. Each category, or form of the PSR, is associated with both a class of Object and a form of necessity.

1. *Principle of Sufficient Reason of Becoming*

This principle is also known as the *law of causality*.The class of Objects this form relates to is that of empirical representations. According to Kant’s formula, this includes both the formal (space, time and causality) and the material parts of phenomena. Schopenhauer discusses the fact that the *Understanding,* operating from within the human, is responsible for uniting the *a priori* forms of space and time creating the complex that is empirical reality, held together by the *law of causality*, again intuited through the *Understanding*. Because of this vital importance of the understanding, only present in the Subject, in interpreting the world of Objects according to its innate forms, essentially creating the objective outer world from the raw material of the senses, there can be no external Object without an observing Subject.

The law of causality works only between *changes* in states. The preceding change we identify as the *cause* while the following change is the *effect*. It is always a mistake to consider objects themselves as causes or effects. Schopenhauer makes several observations regarding this cause-effect relationship. One, although we often attribute a single event as a cause, in a general consideration, we would be more accurate to consider the entire preceding state as the cause. Two, because of the nature of the chain of causality, it is necessarily without a beginning. From this latter consideration, he lambasts the Cosmological Proof for the existence of God as being necessarily false because it implies the annulment of the principle of sufficient reason for no other reason than it is convenient for theologians. Three, the relation between cause and effect is a necessary one and takes the form of a *physical necessity*.

Schopenhauer takes a turn into basic physics next and derives two well-known laws of physics from his law of causality, namely the law of inertia and the permanence of substance. He points out according to the law of causality an Object *must* remain in its current state unless it is acted on by an outside change. Regarding the second, he says that because the law of causality (the only form the Understanding can conceive of change at all) only acts on states, substance (the underlying matter that undergoes change) is never subject to change, that is, it can neither be created nor destroyed. He also identifies the forces of nature (electricity, magnetism, etc) as the means of the cause but never the cause themselves. He reinforces this idea by stating that a force is something universal, applicable at all times in all places, whereas a change (either cause or effect) is always individual and local. Forces of nature stand with substance in being untouched by the law of causality.

Causality operates under three distinct forms; cause, in its strictest sense, stimulus and motive. Cause is the form which holds in the inorganic kingdom and operates quite blindly and mechanically within clear logical, mathematical rules, e.g. action always equals reaction. Stimulus holds over organic life and while still being blind is no longer bound by such strict mechanical rules, e.g. action and reaction are not necessarily equal, such as in the movement of a plant towards sunlight. Motive is the domain of true animal life and has intellect as its medium with knowledge as its foundation. The true definition of the animal is therefore the faculty of knowing, or representing. Schopenhauer defines motivation as causality passing through knowledge, reaching the unavoidable conclusion that motives are causes and therefore operate with the same necessity that all causes bring. This necessity is easily observed in animals whose simple intellect is restricted to intuition, but for humans, whose intellect encompasses the abstract, the process is somewhat more complicated. With the power of reason, a human is able to weigh various motives against each other and let them “try their strength on his will.” The most powerful motive then decides him or her and the effect ensues with all the necessity of Newton’s laws of physics. Freewill is therefore an illusion.

From the forms of causality, Schopenhauer expands on his conception of the Understanding reiterating the point that sensation is a process which occurs entirely within the perceiving organism and as such cannot contain anything outside of it. We don’t see the world as it is, we see it the way we, or more correctly, our Understanding makes it. Understanding imposes its inner form of time, to give succession to events in the external world, and its outer form of space to place the event or Object outside the organism. The Understanding then conceives the corporeal sensation as an *effect* and identifies the *cause* as the external experience. It is in this way that the Understanding applies the law of causality, passing from effect to cause allowing the intellect to construct the objective world we perceive.

Next, Schopenhauer takes the time to clarify some more definitions. He equates that which the Understanding knows as *reality* and that which Reason knows as *truth*, that is, a judgement having a sufficient reason. *Illusion* opposes reality and *error* stands in opposition to truth.

The subjective correlate to this first class of objects is the Understanding.

1. *Principle of Sufficient Reason of Knowing*

The class of Objects this form relates to is that of *conceptions*. Schopenhauer defines conceptions as abstract representations, or representations drawn from representations, as opposed to the intuitive representations that humans share with lesser animals. Conceptions are always more general than the perceptions from which they are composed and this leads Schopenhauer to compare the former to the later as we do the genus to the species. To conceive is therefore to think less than we perceive.

Not only this, but Schopenhauer takes it one step further and asserts that conceptions, being nothing more than mere abstractions, are in fact, *not* perceptible. Considering this we would never be able to retain them in our consciousness were they not fixed and retained in our senses by the arbitrary signs we call ‘words.’ If one thinks about it, one realises that words are always general and never indicate individual, actual instances; they are therefore never perceptible objects. The fundamental essence of Reason lies in conceptions and conceptions are grasped and retained through the medium of language.

It is through this capacity of the Reason to form conceptions by dropping traits and instances found in the individual that abstract thought outside of time and space is possible. Just as we remove features from that tree in front of us to form the general conception of ‘tree,’ we can also drop the formalisms of time and space, transcending them to think abstractly, in terms of past, future and what is spatially absent.

Schopenhauer warns that conceptions must not be confused with pictures of the imagination, which he calls *phantasms*. We use phantasms as representations of conceptions which is impossible to achieve since there can be no representation of a general notion. So, rather than conjuring up an image of a general conception, the imagination adds details to invoke a phantasm.

The *faculty of judgement* operates when we think, that is to say, when we connect intuitive knowledge garnered by the Understanding with abstract knowledge formulated by the Reason. Most thought indeed occurs this way, in a constant interplay between intuition and abstraction as we strive to make sense of and align our intuitions about the external world with our abstractions and insights gained from the application of Reason. Thinking also occurs in connecting or separating conceptions and these kinds of relations are called *judgements*.

It is regarding judgements that the principle of sufficient reason of knowing concerns itself. If a judgement is to express any kind of knowledge at all, it must have a sufficient ground or reason. *Truth* is the reference of a judgement to something different from itself from which it receives its veracity.

Schopenhauer goes on to define four kinds of truth that judgements may rest upon. First, the *logical* or *formal truth* where a judgement has for its reason another judgement. Syllogisms fall under this category. Second, an *empirical truth* arises from a judgement founded on an intuitive representation, that is, experience. This requires the faculty judgement in mediating between the conceptions and the intuitions. Third, *transcendental truths* rely on judgements centred on the forms of empirical knowledge (i.e. space and time). Judgements such as these are *a priori* and include such things as mathematical axioms. Fourth are *metalogical truths* which come from judgements founded on the formal conditions of all thinking, contained in the Reason and summarised as follows:

* A subject is equal to the sum of its total predicates.
* No predicate can be attributed and denied to a subject at the same time.
* One of two opposite, contradictory predicates must belong to every subject.
* Truth is the reference of a judgement to something outside of it, as its sufficient reason.

Partway through this section, Schopenhauer summarises his entire perceiving and thinking model for us in the following way. The Understanding creates its model of the external world from the sensory impressions it receives. Reason takes this and works up conceptions which it fixes in the mind through words. It is these conceptions which then make up the backbone of the judgements and conclusions which are our thoughts. Reason, therefore has no material, only a formal content in Logic which contains the forms and rules for thinking operations.

The type of necessity that holds in the principle of sufficient reason of knowing is *logical necessity,* where once we admit the premises, the conclusion must follow. The subjective correlate to this second class of objects is Reason.

1. *Principle of Sufficient Reason of Being*

The class of Objects this form relates to is that of the *a priori* forms of the inner and outer sense; time and space. Schopenhauer says that each division of time and space determine one another in a reciprocal fashion with reference to these relations (succession and position) according to the principle of sufficient reason of being.

The position of each division of space towards any other also determines its absolute position with reference to any other possible space. Regarding time, every instant is conditioned by the preceding one.

Geometry and mathematics as *a priori* concepts especially have their reason in this aspect of the PSR. Perhaps not surprisingly, the type of necessity that this aspect participates in is *mathematical necessity*.

The subjective correlate to this third class of objects is pure Sensibility.

1. *Principle of Sufficient Reason of Acting*

The class of Objects this form relates to is quite unique. It only comprises one Object for each individual. This Object is the immediate object of the inner sense, the Object for the knowing Subject; *Will*.

All knowledge must involve a subject and an object, so even our self-consciousness is divided into that which knows and that which is known. It is the latter, that is the object, or Will. So the subject knows itself as *Willing*, but not as *knowing*. There can be no knowledge of knowing because that would involve separation between the Subject from knowledge while it nevertheless knew that knowing. This is clearly impossible. “I know” is an analytical but “I will” is a synthetical, *a posteriori* proposition given from inner experience in time alone.

With every decision we make, we can ask, why? This something which has occurred and from which a decision was reached, we can call its reason. More clearly, we know it as the motive of the action which follows. This is why Schopenhauer also calls this principle the *Law of Motives.* Causality is only the form of the PSR as applied to the first class of Objects and so this fourth form of the PSR features as “causality seen from within.”

At the root of all actions lies the Will, which urges the Intellect, in accordance with the interests of the individual, to recall those representations which are logically or by proximity in time or space, related to them. This whole process takes place in an instant and as such often goes unnoticed; representations or concepts seeming to appear unbidden, without reason, however this would contravene the PSR in its most basic formulation and so must be considered impossible. Every picture of the imagination, every judgement, every conception, every representation must be called forth by an act of volition through Willing of the Subject according to a motive, even if that motive is unknown to the Subject concerned.

As a final note in this section, Schopenhauer leaves a comment about memory. He disagrees with conventional thinking that looks on memory as a kind of storehouse of representations which we can recall as needed. If this was true, then our memories would always be perfect but we all know that the representations we recall from memory are anything but perfect. Rather than coming from a storehouse, memories are re-created anew each time they are called forth. Practice still serves to make the process of recall easier and more accurate.

The necessity involved in this form of the PSR is *moral necessity* and is every bit as compelling (due to the force of the motive) as any other form of the PSR, although we obviously have more difficulty discerning the reasons and the links between them and the effects, as well as predicting what those effects will be.

The subjective correlate to this fourth class of objects is the Self-consciousness.

Schopenhauer concludes his thesis by saying that the PSR means that everything existing, no matter where or when, exists by reason of something else. Since the PSR is *a priori* in nature it cannot be applied to the world itself, i.e. to the thing-in-itself, and as such can tell us nothing about it, which is exactly the refutation of the Cosmological Proof.