SPINOZA’S PSR AS A PRINCIPLE OF CLEAR AND DISTINCT REPRESENTATION

BY

DANIEL SCHNEIDER

Abstract: It is argued first, that Spinoza’s Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) is best seen as an auxiliary premise and not as an axiom of the Ethics; second, that Spinoza held the PSR to be a self-evident truth that indicates a necessary condition for clearly and distinctly representing the existence or non-existence of a thing; and third, that this interpretation of Spinoza’s PSR explains the near absence of the PSR within the demonstrations of the Ethics as well as the importance of the principle in Spinoza’s thought.

It is generally agreed that the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) plays an important role in Spinoza’s Ethics. However, nearly every other issue concerning Spinoza’s PSR is a subject of dispute. Some commentators assert that Spinoza’s PSR is expressed within the first axioms of the Ethics. Other commentators express bafflement that his PSR is not expressed in the axioms at all.

Determining the PSR’s place within the formal apparatus of the Ethics is no trivial matter: Spinoza’s PSR is often understood as the thesis that everything is, in principle, intelligible. Stuart Hampshire, Martial Gueroult, and Alexandre Matheron (among others) have claimed that Spinoza is not only committed to the intelligibility or explicity of all things, but also that this commitment serves as a starting point for his metaphysical thought. But is this the correct way to understand Spinoza’s PSR? And is this how the principle is actually used in the Ethics?

Questions regarding the significance and placement of Spinoza’s PSR are not the only difficulties facing the interpreter. Spinoza’s clearest expression of his PSR looks much like an imperative:
Cuiuscumque rei assignari debet causa seu ratio, tam cur existit, quam cur non existit.® [For each thing a cause or reason must be assigned as much for its existence as for its nonexistence.]

Were another philosopher to express a fundamental principle of her thought as an unqualified imperative, it might not be so disconcerting.® But as one of Spinoza’s earliest critics notes: ‘[Spinoza] asserts that for those who think aright no room is left for precepts and commandments. . . .’® In both the Ethics and in the Theological-Political Treatise [TTP], Spinoza presents rule-following as a behavior indicative of the lowest form of knowing.® So is Spinoza’s PSR offered as an inexplicable rule? Or is there a reason why Spinoza insists that a cause or reason must be assigned for the existence or non-existence of each thing?

The Ethics offers little material for answering these questions. Indeed, the minimal treatment of the PSR within the Ethics has itself been put forth as an interpretive question. As Michael LeBuffe put it, ‘Granting the importance of the PSR [. . .], why does Spinoza not introduce it, or even name it, in the formal apparatus of The Ethics?’®

This article proposes some answers to these questions. In Section 1, I determine the place of Spinoza’s PSR within the formal apparatus of the Ethics. Contrary to several popular readings, I argue that his PSR is not expressed in the formal axioms of the work, and is in fact, assigned a surprisingly minimal role. This is not to suggest that the PSR is unimportant to Spinoza’s thought, but rather, that the role of the principle within Spinoza’s arguments has been misunderstood. In Section 2 and 3, I explain the basis of Spinoza’s commitment to the PSR: In Section 2, I connect the PSR of the Ethics to the a nihilo nihil fit principle mentioned in Spinoza’s other writings. I argue that Spinoza held the a nihilo nihil fit principle to be a principle of clear and distinct representation, and in Section 3, I explain why Spinoza would consider his PSR to be this kind of principle as well. Finally, in Section 4, I argue that reading Spinoza’s PSR as a principle of clear and distinct representation explains both the principle’s near absence within formal structure of the Ethics and its unique importance to Spinoza’s thought.

1. The placement and usage of the principle of sufficient reason in the Ethics

The literature is decidedly inconsistent in its claims regarding the PSR’s placement in the Ethics. It is sometimes claimed that Spinoza’s commitment to the PSR is expressed in the second axiom of the work:®

© 2014 The Author
Pacific Philosophical Quarterly © 2014 University of Southern California and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
More commonly, it is claimed that the principle is explicitly stated in the third axiom:12

E1A3: Ex data causa determinata necessario sequitur effectus, et contra si nulla detur determinata causa, impossibile est ut effectus sequatur.
[From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.]

Only rarely is it claimed that Spinoza’s PSR is not among the axioms at all.

I argue here that a careful examination of the Ethics reveals the rarely stated position to be correct: Spinoza’s PSR is not expressed by any of his axioms. Rather, it only appears in the Ethics as a supplementary premise external to the central argumentation of the work. In the two instances the PSR is explicitly used in the Ethics, it is used an auxiliary premise. It is introduced without any of the citations normally employed by Spinoza to refer to the propositions and axioms that constitute the Ethics’s geometric structure.13

The PSR is first used in the scholium of E1P8 to show another way ‘to deduce’ [concludere] a claim that is established earlier in E1P5 without any appeal to the PSR.14 This scholium’s demonstration involves two notes about the nature of definition, and then as a third note, a weak statement of Spinoza’s PSR:

III. Notandum, dari necessario uniuscuiusque rei existentis certam aliquam causam, propter quam existit. [Note, there must be, for each existing thing, a certain cause on account of which it exists.]

I say a ‘weak statement’ because in Spinoza’s other explicit use of the PSR, he makes a stronger claim:

Cuiuscumque rei assignari debet causa seu ratio, tam cur existit, quam cur non existit. [For each thing a cause or reason must be assigned for its existence as much as for its non-existence.]

This stronger claim occurs in the first alternative demonstration for E1P11. In this demonstration Spinoza uses the strong form of the PSR to offer a second argument for the necessary existence of God, that is, a substance with infinite attributes.

Note that both versions of Spinoza’s PSR appear in alternative demonstrations. Thus, despite the well-remarked importance of the PSR to Spinoza’s thought, the entire primary structure of the Ethics would remain
unchanged if the PSR were never introduced at all. Far from being a fundamental axiom or proposition employed throughout the demonstrations of the *Ethics*, the PSR is used in the work only as an auxiliary premise to help clarify two claims that Spinoza had already demonstrated without the use of the principle. This merely auxiliary role constitutes the formal place of the PSR in the *Ethics*.

And this is worth noting. Many commentators have persuasively argued that something very much like the metaphysics of the *Ethics* would emerge if one began by assuming the truth of Spinoza’s PSR and then articulated the way the world would need to be in order for this principle to be the case. But nothing like this thought process is ever expressed in the demonstrations of the *Ethics*. Indeed, as I shall argue, this way of explaining the world would be antithetical to Spinozism: It would be ‘to get the order of nature upside down.’ Spinoza would deny that the order of nature is what it is, because of the PSR. Rather he would insist that it is because God or Nature is what it is, that the PSR is true.

For Spinoza, an adequate explanation of a thing must always involve the idea of the infinite substance he calls God or Nature. Be that as it may, Spinoza’s axioms are introduced before he ever introduces God or Nature as the proper foundation of an explanation. Indeed, Spinoza uses his axioms to direct us so we can recognize the adequate idea of Substance we necessarily possess. Thus, neither does the unsuitability of Spinoza’s PSR for explaining why things are the way they are, nor does the absence of Spinoza’s PSR from any of the primary demonstrations of the *Ethics* prove that the principle is not among the work’s axioms. But given that in the two instances the PSR is actually used the principle is introduced without citation to any of the listed axioms or to any prior proposition, it certainly looks as if Spinoza’s PSR is brought in from outside the formal apparatus of the geometric exposition.

Most commentators however disagree. Generally, in the literature it is claimed that the third axiom of the first part of the *Ethics* explicitly states Spinoza’s PSR. Interpreters claim this because they read E1A3 as a statement of universal causation. But consider the following three claims:

1. All causes necessarily produce their effects
2. All effects are necessarily produced by their causes.
3. Everything is an effect.

Claim 2 in conjunction with Claim 3 entails that everything has a cause. And this is the statement of universal causation that many commentators identify in E1A3 as a statement of Spinoza’s PSR. But Claim 3 is not found in E1A3. E1A3 expresses only Claims 1 and 2. The expression ‘et contra’ within the axiom makes this clear.
E1A3: *Ex data causa determinata necessario sequitur effectus, et contra si nulla detur determinata causa, impossibile est ut effectus sequatur.*

[From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow.]

While Spinoza does in fact hold that every thing is both a cause and an effect, this is a position that he establishes through his analysis of the infinite power of God or Nature. It is not a position expressed in E1A3. And it is not a position assumed in any of his arguments that rely on E1A3.

E1A2 is also often read as an expression of Spinoza’s PSR:

E1A2: *Id quod per aliud non potest concipi, per se concipi debet.*

[What cannot be conceived through another must be conceived through itself.]

On the face of it, E1A2 and Spinoza’s PSR do not seem connected. Spinoza’s PSR is a principle that applies to the existence or non-existence of a thing. E1A2 concerns conceivability. But several commentators connect this axiom to Spinoza’s PSR by reading E1A2 as the claim that all things must be conceivable – a plausible way of interpreting the axiom ‘Whatever is not conceived through another, must be conceived through itself.’ And since these commentators hold – quite rightly – that causation, intelligibility, conceivability, and explicable are all tightly linked in Spinoza’s thought they conclude from reading E1A2 as claiming ‘every thing can be explained’ that this axiom is ‘an expression of the principle of sufficient reason.’

But this is far too quick. The ‘*id quod*’ of E1A2 – the ‘what’ of E1A2’s ‘*What cannot be conceived through itself . . .*’ – that they interpret as ‘every thing’ is ambiguous. ‘*Id quod*’ can mean ‘what, [of whatever exists],’ – i.e. ‘existing things’, or it can mean ‘what, [of whatever is conceived]’ – i.e. ‘conceived things.’ On neither reading does Spinoza’s PSR obviously follow. If we take the first reading and read E1A2 as asserting that every thing that exists must be conceived (either through itself or through another) then the axiom does not entail that all existing things must be assigned a cause or reason for their existence. It only entails that existing things must be conceived.

To make this distinction clear, consider the following: If all existing things must be conceived through themselves or through another, it does not follow that there cannot exist a thing (say a potato) that is conceived through something (extension, presumably) and yet *exists* without cause or reason. On the existential reading of *id quod*, E1A2 only entails that the existing thing must be conceivable – it does *not* entail that the existence of the thing be conceived through itself or through another. And on this reading of *id quod* the strong form of the PSR clearly does not follow.
There is nothing here that suggests that a non-existing thing must be assigned a cause or reason for its non-existence.

If we read the id quod of the axiom as ‘whatever is conceived’ the axiom asserts, ‘Whatever [is conceived] that is not conceived through another must be conceived through itself.’ This, I believe, is the correct reading of the axiom, given its parallels to the axiom that precedes it: ‘Whatever is, is either in itself or in another’ (E1A1). But, whether this is the correct reading of the axiom or not, no one would confuse this reading of E1A2 as an expression of Spinoza’s PSR.25

E1A2 is a curious axiom. The ‘existential’ reading of the axiom does in fact capture a position that Spinoza holds; according to Spinoza’s system, all existing things are indeed conceivable.26 But E1A2 is never used in a single demonstration. Once stated, the axiom is never mentioned or cited again. Thus, although the precise meaning of the axiom is admittedly unclear, it is clear that the universal conceivability of all existing things is a conclusion that is argued to in the Ethics, rather than from. Contra Hampshire, Jacobi, Gueroult, Matheron, Della Rocca and others, the conceivability or intelligibility of all of existence is not a fundamental ‘starting point’ of Spinoza’s argued thought.27

So what then are we to make of Spinoza’s PSR? His PSR is not expressed by any of his axioms. And Spinoza’s PSR is, in any case, a far stronger principle than the thesis of universal intelligibility it has often been mistaken for. Standard objections to principles like Spinoza’s PSR make this latter point clear: One can grant that all of existence must be conceivable (i.e. intelligible) and still reject Spinoza’s PSR, precisely because one holds it to be perfectly conceivable for a thing to come into or out of existence without a cause or reason.28 Spinoza, of course, would deny this. He takes great pains in the Ethics to demonstrate that ‘nothing can be or be conceived without God.’29 But, in claiming that his PSR is a truth ‘known through itself,’30 Spinoza treats the inconceivability of a causeless existence or a causeless non-existence as directly intuitable – without looking to any of the argued claims of his metaphysics.

In asserting his PSR to be self-evident then, Spinoza asserts something to be self-evident about how the existence or non-existence of things can be conceived. According to Spinoza, we directly grasp that we cannot truly conceived the existence or non-existence of a thing without assigning a cause or reason.

2. The PSR as an absolute eternal truth

I have argued that Spinoza does not commit himself to his PSR within the axioms of the Ethics. However, in several of his other writings Spinoza
does commit himself to a principle that directly entails the weak version of his PSR. This principle is the familiar *a nihilo nihil fit* principle of antiquity. This principle directly entails the weak version of Spinoza’s PSR because it entails that there is no thing that is not caused by some thing. Thus according to the *a nihilo nihil fit* principle, if there exists a thing, it has a positive cause for its existence.  

In a letter to Simon de Vries, Spinoza offers the *a nihilo nihil fit* principle as an exemplar of an absolute *aeterna verita* [eternal truth].

As to your further question as to whether things or the affections of things are also eternal truths, I say, most certainly. If you go on to ask why I do not call them eternal truths, I reply, in order to mark a distinction, universally accepted, between these and the truths which do not explicate a thing or the affection of a thing, as, for instance, ‘from nothing, nothing is made.’ This and similar propositions, I say, are called eternal truths in an absolute sense, by which title is meant simply that *they do not have any place outside the mind*, etc.

The term ‘eternal truth’ shows up quite often in Spinoza’s writings. The term is common in 17th century philosophical parlance, and like many of the common philosophical terms of the era, questions regarding its analysis and scope formed a lively subject of disagreement. In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*TDIE*), Spinoza defines an eternal truth as ‘that which being positive could never become negative,’ and this appears to be what Spinoza generally intends when he uses the term.

In the above passage however, Spinoza specifies a further ‘absolute’ sense for the term ‘eternal truth.’ Spinoza grants that given his necessitarianism, all things (and their modifications) are eternal truths. However, Spinoza goes on to distinguish eternal truths *taken in the absolute sense* as truths having ‘no home outside the mind’ [*nullam sedem habent extra mentem*].

In asserting that principles like the *a nihilo nihil fit* principle have no place outside the mind Spinoza repeats a claim of Descartes. In the *Principles of Philosophy* Descartes writes:

> All the objects of our perceptions we regard either as things, or affections of things, or else as eternal truths which have no existence outside our thought . . . when we recognize that it is impossible for anything to come from nothing, the proposition *Nothing comes from nothing* is regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth that resides within our mind.

Descartes’ account of the eternal truths is no simple matter, but roughly speaking according to Descartes, an eternal truth like ‘nothing comes from nothing’ is understood as necessarily true because God willed the proposition to be a necessary truth, and imprinted the proposition clearly and distinctly onto our minds. Thus, when Descartes claims that an eternal
truth has no place outside our thought, he means that the eternal truth is nothing but a true proposition imprinted upon the mind.

There is little in Descartes' account of the eternal truths that would be acceptable to Spinoza. Spinoza cannot explain the truthfulness of the claim ‘nothing comes from nothing’ by appealing to the brute will of God: Spinoza's God has no brute will. Nor can Spinoza explain our cognition of this truth by describing our mind as a substantial entity upon which our creator imprinted a proposition. Indeed, there is practically nothing in Spinoza's account of God or of the human mind that is compatible with the Cartesian picture. What then can Spinoza mean when he claims that there are eternal truths that have no place outside the mind?

According to Spinoza, a human mind is a modification of God or Nature. God or Nature is an infinite substance of infinite attributes. Expressed in the attribute of extension, the modification identified with the human mind is a human body, but as expressed in the attribute of thought, it is a human mind. The human mind, as Spinoza puts it, just is the idea of ‘a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else’.

Ideas for Spinoza are intrinsically intentional. They always present a content that expresses either adequately or inadequately the nature of their object (Ideatum). Since a mind is nothing but the idea of a body and a body is imbedded in the world, a mind represents the various ways the body is related to the world. The human mind, as a representation of a human body, includes not only representations of the numerous impingements of other extended bodies (Spinoza's account of sensation and memory), but also adequate representations of the aspects of reality equally present in the human body and throughout the causal nexus in which it is imbedded. According to Spinoza, it is precisely because there are things with an equal place within and without the object of our mind that we possess an adequate grasp of these natures. Given this account of the ‘mind as the idea of the body,’ it is puzzling how Spinoza could assert that we form true representations with no place outside the mind.

To be sure, Spinoza can account for fictions that have no place outside the mind. Spinoza acknowledges that the representations comprising the mind are manipulated, abstracted and recombined in ways that do not correspond to reality. Hence, Spinoza can account for our notions of measure, time, number, and other entia rationis like species and genera that have no objective reality. However, Spinoza's absolute eternal truths, as truths, cannot be explained in this way – they are truths after all, not useful fictions. And ‘a true idea must correspond with its object.’

The truth-maker(s) for the eternal truths cannot be located in the things or the relations of things that are represented in our ideas. If the absolute eternal truths were understood through things or their relations, then these truths would, contrary to Spinoza's description, have a place outside the mind. They would be truths that adequately depict an object (be it a
relation or a nature) external to the mind. Spinoza also cannot locate the truth-maker of the eternal truths in a rational faculty that exists over and above our ideas. For again, Spinoza holds that the mind is simply the idea of the body ‘and nothing else.’

Since there is nothing else to the mind other than ideas, and since we can rule out any representation of a thing or its relations as the basis of an absolute eternal truth, there is nothing in the mind for these eternal truths to be grounded in, or made true by, other than the representational nature of ideas themselves. More specifically, I propose that the absolute eternal truths, as truths, are grounded in the nature of adequate representation, that is, representation with ‘all the intrinsic denominations of a true idea.’

On the proposed view, Spinoza’s absolute eternal truths are true in virtue of the nature of clear and distinct representation and not in virtue of the nature of the things that are clearly and distinctly represented. The principle of non-contradiction (PNC) is arguably an example of such a truth: It is the nature of clear and distinct representation to depict something as being a particular way, and not to simultaneously depict that thing as not being that way. Indeed, insofar as an idea or representation violates the PNC, it fails to represent a particular content at all. Considered in this manner, the PNC can be seen as a principle grounded in, and known through, the nature of clear and distinct representation. And this, I propose, is what Spinoza must have had in mind when he asserted that the absolute eternal truths are truths that have no home outside the mind.

This is also roughly how Spinoza describes his own exemplar of an absolute eternal truth, the a nihilo nihil fit principle, in his explication of Descartes’ philosophy:

[Those things that each of us observe in himself, insofar as he is thinking . . . we perceive not only with equal evidence and clarity [as the cogito], but even, perhaps, more distinctly. For they affirm not only that we think, but how we think. . . . We shall also say that those propositions . . . cannot be called into doubt unless at the same time this unshakable foundation of ours [the cogito] should be put in doubt. E.g., if someone would wish to doubt whether something comes from nothing, he will at the same time be able to doubt whether we exist when we think . . . But since I cannot do that, it will also be impossible for me to think that something may come from nothing.]

Here Spinoza claims a) that there are basic principles of thinking that are perceived with an equal clarity and perhaps an even greater distinctness than the cogito. And b) that these basic principles of thinking are necessary for certainty in the cogito, which in the Cartesian context of the text, implies they are necessary for clear and distinct cognition.

We have at hand, then, a rudimentary account of how Spinoza can hold that there are eternal truths that have no place outside the mind: the
absolute eternal truths are truths of clear and distinct representation. We even have an example of an argument written by Spinoza that attempts to show why a nihilo nihil fit should be considered a necessary principle of clear and distinct representation. However, despite this progress we are still far from an account of why Spinoza should himself think the a nihilo nihil fit principle, let alone the strong form of his PSR, are principles of clear and distinct representation. For one, the aforementioned argument from Spinoza’s Descartes Principles of Philosophy is decidedly Cartesian: It is constructed around the premise that the cogito constitutes the ‘unshakable foundation’ of our knowledge, and this is not a premise to which Spinoza commits himself. Two, the argument is decidedly poor: there is no reason why certainty in the logically weaker claim that our thought does not come from nothing, requires certainty in the logically stronger claim that no thing comes from nothing.

In the next section, I develop an argument that explains why Spinoza would consider a nihilo nihil fit to be a principle of clear and distinct representation. More important for our purposes, this argument also explains why Spinoza would consider the strong form of his PSR, i.e. that, there must be assigned a cause or reason for the existence and non-existence of a thing, to be a principle of clear and distinct representation as well.

3. The epistemic basis of Spinoza’s PSR

Spinoza has quite a bit to say about how we come to have ideas that represent things as existing. For starters, he claims that the existence of a thing can be represented through perceptual experience:

E2P25: The human Mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own Body.

Dem.: If the human Body is not affected by an external body in any way, then (by P7) the idea of the human Body, i.e. (by P13) the human Mind, is also not affected in any way by the idea of the existence of that body, or it does not perceive the existence of that external body in any way. But insofar as the human Body is affected by an external body in some way, to that extent, [the human mind] (by P16 and P16C1) perceives the external body, q.e.d.

On Spinoza’s account, our mind perceives an external thing as existing to the extent that the idea of the thing is implicated in the idea of our existing body. Since our mind is a representation of our existing body, when another body affects this body the mind represents this affection as existing as well. And this is how through perception, we come to have ideas that represent external things as existing. What the mind represents through perception however, is decidedly confused.
E2P29S: I say expressly that the Mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused [NS: and mutilated] knowledge, of itself, of its own Body, and of external bodies, so long as it perceives things from the common order of nature, i.e., so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that . . .

Not only is it unclear whether the things perceived [or imagined] actually exist; it is also unclear what existing things are actually involved in the perception. In sight, for example, we do not represent the true nature of the sense organ (the eye), or the true nature of the bodies sensed (neither the impinging photons, nor the bodies they are reflected from). Instead of clearly and distinctly representing an order of existing things, our perceptual ideas represent a highly confused, but undeniably useful, representation of our existing body’s interaction with its environment.

There is however, according to Spinoza, also a non-perceptual way in which our ideas can come to represent external things as existing. Spinoza claims that from our idea of the essence of God, i.e., Substance or Nature, we can know, i.e. clearly and distinctly represent, God’s existence.

E1P8S: If someone were to say that he had a clear and distinct idea, i.e., true, idea of substance, and nevertheless doubted whether such a substance existed, that would indeed be the same as if he were to say that he had a true idea, and nevertheless doubted whether it was false (as is evident to anyone sufficiently attentive). Of course nothing more absurd can be conceived.

Our idea of God does not require any fortuitous encounters with the common order of nature. The idea is, in a fashion, implicit in our being a thinking thing. Not only is God’s existence clearly and distinctly represented through our idea of his essence, so too can the existence of things that follow from this essence also be clearly and distinctly inferred. As Spinoza writes in E1P25S:

From the given divine nature both the essence of things and their existence must be inferred . . . God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself.

And in the demonstration of E5P30:

Eternity is the very essence of God insofar as this involves necessary existence (by E1D8). To conceive things under a species of eternity, therefore, is to conceive things insofar as they are conceived as real beings, or insofar as through God’s essence they involve existence.

Insofar as we successfully conceive the existence of things ‘under a species of eternity’ we necessarily conceive this existence adequately, that is, clearly and distinctly. For Spinoza then, there are two ways in which our ideas can come to represent things as existing.
Thus, one way we can conceive things as existing is through perception. The other way is through our adequate idea of God or Nature. The former involves confused and mutilated representations, but the latter allows for an adequate, or clear and distinct grasp of the existence of a thing. Through our adequate grasp of the essence of God we can clearly and distinctly represent the true order in which things exist. In these clear and distinct representations of the existences of things, their existence is not represented through the essence of the things themselves, but rather through the necessary existence of God or Nature.57

Underlying both of these accounts of how the existence of things comes to be represented in our ideas is a basic claim about representation itself. Throughout his writings, Spinoza holds that with the exception of God, to represent a thing, is not to represent its actual existence or non-existence. In the Ethics:

E1P24C: For whether things exist or do not exist, in reflecting on their essence we realize that this essence involves neither existence nor duration.

And in the Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts:

For if we consider only their essence, we can conceive it clearly and distinctly without existence.58

According to Spinoza, to conceive of the essence of a thing is to posit the thing, and to conceive of a thing is to conceive of its essence (E2D2). That the existence of the thing is not represented when we posit (conceive of) a thing is a claim that Spinoza held to be obvious. 59 It is not something he argues. It is something he thinks is already known. Simply put, for Spinoza, to clearly and distinctly conceive of any thing (that is not God) is not the same as clearly and distinctly conceiving the thing as existing.60

Looking past the medieval nomenclature (and the exceptionalism with which Spinoza treats the essence of God), the core insight of Spinoza’s distinction is something that most contemporary philosophers might also regard as obvious: The conception of a thing does not represent the thing’s actual existence. Conceiving of, say, the sun, for example, is not the same as conceiving the sun as existing. In even a true conception of a thing, the actual existence (or actual non-existence) of the thing is not discoverable through the conception of the thing alone.

But how then are we to clearly and distinctly represent a thing as existing or not existing? As noted, in the Ethics Spinoza gives an account of the two
ways in which a thing’s existence comes to be implicated in our ideas. But without going into these metaphysical accounts at all, we can be certain, simply on the basis of Spinoza’s distinction between the representation of a thing and the representation of the thing as existing (or as non-existing), that in any clear and distinct representation of the existence or non-existence of a thing something other than the nature of the thing is required. And not just any something other will do. In order to represent a thing as existing (or as non-existing), we must represent something that makes the thing’s actual existence or non-existence a discernable feature of our representation.

And so there is a simple argument for why Spinoza would hold *a nihilo nihil fit* as a principle of the clear and distinct representation of *the existence of things*: If the actual existence of a thing is not represented by the idea of the thing *simpliciter*, it is surely not represented by the idea of the thing along with nothing *simpliciter*. Thus, there can be no clear and distinct representation of a thing as existing in which the existence of the thing is represented through nothing.

This line of reasoning also supports an argument for the strong form of Spinoza’s PSR. Since according to Spinoza, it is self-evident that one cannot clearly and distinctly represent the existence or non-existence of a thing merely by representing the thing’s essence, something more than the essence must be included in a representation of a thing as existing or as non-existing. And whatever it is that, if represented, makes the existence or non-existence of the thing a discernable feature of an idea’s content, is nothing other than the cause or reason for the thing’s existence or non-existence. And so, to clearly and distinctly represent a thing’s state of existence, a cause or reason must be assigned.

This last move may seem problematic. Although Spinoza may have plausibly thought that a representation of a thing is not sufficient for a representation of the thing as existing or non-existing, why would he think that ‘whatever else’ is needed to represent the thing as existing or non-existing is the ‘cause or reason’ for the thing’s existence or non-existence?

Once again, the answer here does not rely on the sophisticated metaphysical system revealed in the *Ethics*. Instead, the answer relies on Spinoza’s use of the term ‘cause.’ According to Spinoza, ‘the knowledge of an effect depends upon, and involves, the knowledge of the cause.’ Spinoza also holds that there is a necessary (i.e. conceptual) connection between a cause and an effect. In the case we are considering, both of these characteristics of a causal relation are satisfied: The knowledge (i.e. the clear and distinct representation) of a thing’s existence or non-existence depends upon, and involves, the knowledge of something other than that thing. And we’ve also established the necessary conceptual connection between this ‘something other’ and the existence or non-existence the thing since we have implicitly defined this ‘something other’ as ‘that whose
representation would clearly and distinctly represent the existence or non-existence of the thing. Thus, as far as Spinoza is concerned, it is appropriate to describe this ‘something other’ as the cause or reason for the thing’s existence or non-existence.

According to the metaphysical system revealed in the Ethics, the cause or reason for the existence (or non-existence) of any thing is, in either a direct or mediated sense, God or Nature. But here, we can ignore Spinoza’s complex metaphysical account of converging chains of finite and infinite causes. Spinoza gets his PSR without relying on this metaphysical picture at all. Instead, Spinoza gets his PSR simply from the nature of representation. Spinoza holds that for any thing that is not God or a self-contradiction, a clear and distinct representation of this thing does not represent it as existing or non-existing. Thus, in any clear and distinct representation of a thing as existing or as non-existing, something more than just the thing’s essence has been represented. And according to Spinoza’s account of ‘cause or reason’, this ‘something more’ is nothing other than a representation of the cause or reason for the thing’s existence or non-existence. It is as simple as that.

I have argued then that Spinoza’s PSR, in both its weak and strong form, can reasonably be seen by Spinoza to be a principle that indicates a necessary condition for the clear and distinct representation of a thing as existing or as non-existing. And as I’ve portrayed it, Spinoza’s PSR is not grounded in the assumption that every thing that exists must be intelligible. Nor must his PSR be seen as a brute fact, or even as a brute imperative. Instead, I have argued that Spinoza’s PSR is grounded in the ‘self-evident’ claim that the existence or non-existence of a thing cannot be conceived (clearly and distinctly represented) without the assignment of a cause or reason. In the next and final section of this article this portrayal of Spinoza’s PSR is used to explain why the principle does little explicit work in the Ethics, and yet remains of crucial importance to Spinoza’s thought.

4. The PSR’s minimal role in the formal apparatus of the Ethics and importance to Spinoza’s thought

In the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, Spinoza has this to say about the proper order of philosophizing:

As for order . . . it is required, and reason demands, that we ask, as soon as possible, whether there is a certain being, and at the same time, what sort of being it is, which is the cause of all things, so that its objective essence may also be the cause of all our ideas, and then our mind will (as we have said) reproduce Nature as much as possible. For it will have Nature’s essence, order and unity objectively.
Spinoza emphasizes throughout the *TdIE*, that the ultimate epistemic goal is to reproduce in our own mind the ‘essence, order, and unity’ of Nature itself:

\[\ldots\ \text{it is evident that for our mind to reproduce completely the likeness of Nature, it must bring all of its ideas forth from that idea which represents the source and origin of the whole of Nature} \ldots\]

\[\ldots\ \text{we shall strive to connect and order [our ideas] so that our mind, as far as possible, reproduces objectively the formal character of Nature} \ldots\]

This is also the epistemic goal described in the *Ethics*:

\[\text{[I]t is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, or reason. In this one thing consists man’s highest happiness, or blessedness. Indeed, blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind that stems from the intuitive knowledge of God. But perfecting the intellect is nothing but understanding God, his attributes, and his actions, which follow from the necessity of his nature.}\]

Given this goal, it is clear why Spinoza would minimize his use of the PSR within the *Ethics*. Spinoza’s philosophical ideal is to depict the manner in which all things are produced by the nature of God. Now, if as I’ve argued, Spinoza’s PSR is an absolute eternal truth, that is, a truth grounded in the nature of representation, then his PSR does not play a direct role in this necessitation: Spinoza’s PSR has no causality. It does not produce things or their natures, and thus, is not an ideal explanatory principle. For Spinoza, things do not come to exist or fail to exist because of the PSR. They come to exist, or fail to exist because of the nature of God.

Thus, unlike the PSR of Leibniz, Spinoza’s PSR is not a principle that directs God or Nature. If Spinoza were to argue that a state of affairs obtains because of the PSR, he would be committing a conceptual error that he warns against:

\[\ldots\ \text{we shall take very great care not to mix up the things that are only in the intellect with those that are real.}\]

He would be attributing to a principle of representation a power or causality that belongs only to real things. In short, because the PSR is held by Spinoza to be a truth with no place outside the mind, it is a truth with no place in the order of things, and thus has no place in the order of Spinozistic explanation.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza indicates that there are different types of axioms with different philosophical utilities. The different uses for these axioms depends in part upon the basis from which they are known or grasped:
With this [account of things equally in the part and in the whole] I have explained the cause of those notions which are called common, and which are the foundations of our reasoning. But some axioms, or notions, result from other causes, which it would be helpful to explain by this method of ours. For from these [explanations] it would be established which notions are more useful than the others, and which are of hardly any use...  

Thus, for Spinoza, not all self-evident notions (axioms) are created equal. Spinoza does not go on to discuss the different causes or the appropriate uses for axioms that are not common notions, but if what I have argued is correct, it is clear why the PSR is axiomatic for Spinoza and yet remains un-ideal for use as a premise in the primary demonstrations of the *Ethics*. Given Spinoza’s epistemic goal, it is always be preferable for him, wherever possible, to demonstrate a proposition through a common notion, or through the nature of things, rather than through an absolute eternal truth like the PSR. It is no mystery then why Spinoza’s PSR is assigned such a minimal role within the formal apparatus of the *Ethics*.  

But although Spinoza’s PSR does not belong in any clear and distinct representation of the actual order of things, the principle does place a powerful constraint on any clear and distinct representation of the actual order of things. As an absolute eternal truth, Spinoza’s PSR entails that in any adequate representation of the existence or non-existence of any thing, a cause or reason must be assigned for its existence or non-existence. Spinoza’s PSR then, provides a powerful check on the cogency of any philosophical account purporting to describe the nature of existence. In the same way that an internal contradiction reveals the inadequacy of a concept or theory, violations of Spinoza’s PSR reveal the unintelligibility of what otherwise might be seen as viable conceptual alternatives. And in fact, this is exactly how the PSR is actually used in the *Ethics*: In E1P8s the PSR is used to illustrate the conceptual incoherence of supposing multiple substances of the same nature, and in E1P11p2 the PSR is used to reveal the inconceivability of a God or Substance that is non-existing.  

Neither Spinoza’s PSR, nor his *Ethics*, relies on the assumption that the world is intelligible. But commentators who have seen intelligibility as a guiding principle of the work are, in a sense, correct: Spinoza had the intent of producing an intelligible philosophy. For Spinoza, his PSR served a crucial role in determining whether this intention was successfully satisfied.

Department of Philosophy  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

NOTES

1 When Leibniz introduced the expression, ‘the principle of sufficient reason,’ it was ascribed to several non-identical principles. Spinoza himself never uses this phrase. Yet
Spinoza does assert that there must be assigned a cause or reason for the existence or non-existence of each thing. And so it is in this sense that Spinoza is generally considered to hold a particularly strong principle identifiable as a version the PSR. For a discussion of the history and variations of the PSR see Pruss, A. (2006). *The Principle of Sufficient Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


4 Michael Della Rocca goes so far as to say that, ‘The PSR is . . . the embodiment of Spinoza’s commitment to intelligibility’: Della Rocca, 2008, p. 4.


6 All references to Spinoza’s works are pulled from three sources: (1) citations of Spinoza’s original Latin are from (1925) *Spinoza Opera*, 4 volumes, C. Gebhard, ed. Heidelberg; (2) Unless otherwise noted, all English citations are from (1985) *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, E. Curley, ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; and (3) (2002) *Spinoza: Complete Works*, S. Shirley, ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. Citations from the *Ethics* use the following format:

E[Ethics] #[Part number] A, P, D [axiom, proposition, definition respectively] #, p, s, L [proof, scholium, lemma respectively]. For example, the passage referenced is the second proof for Proposition 11 of Part 1 of the *Ethics*, or E1P1P2.


8 The passage is from Ep. 42, Lambert de Velthusen to Jacob Ostens: Shirley, 2002, p. 870.

9 See TTP ch. 4, EZP40s2, as well as Spinoza’s *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [*TdeI*] (II/11–12).


13 See EIP5S, EIP11altD.

14 Several commentators have invoked the PSR in their reconstructions of E1P5p. I believe however that Judith Crane and Ronald Sandler have convincingly shown that there is no need to involve the PSR in the defense of this demonstration. See Crane, J. and Sandler, R. (2005). ‘Identity and Distinction in Spinoza’s Ethics,’ *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86, pp. 188–200.

15 This reading is commonly traced to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. See ch. 2 ‘Jacobi and the Pantheism Controversy,’ in Beiser, F. C. (1987). *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from
Kant to Fichte. Cambridge, MA: Harvard. Michael Della Rocca offers a more sophisticated development of this view with his account of the ‘two fold use’ of Spinoza’s PSR discussed throughout his Spinoza (2008).

See E1App. Proponents of the aforementioned interpretation are likely to resist the suggestion that they treat intelligibility as a final cause: They do not explicitly claim that for Spinoza things are the way they are for the sake of intelligibility. However to insist that the world must conform to the demands of intelligibility – without explaining why – is to treat intelligibility as an end that directs the order of things. This is what I claim to be antithetical to Spinozism.

16 I will argue in Section 4 that the explanatory asymmetry identified here suggests an important contrast between the PSR’s role in Spinoza’s philosophy as compared to its role in the philosophy of Leibniz.

17 E1P15, E5P30–32.

18 See for example Nadler, 2006, p. 59.

19 As Hume (THN I.3.4) reminds us, establishing a necessary connection between cause and effect (the conjunction of Claims 1 and 2) does not establish universal causation: ‘Every effect necessarily presupposes a cause; effect being a relative term, of which cause is the correlative. But this does not prove, that every being must be preceded by a cause . . .’: Hume, D. (2005). A Treatise of Human Nature, D. Norton and M. Norton, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 58.

20 As noted by Jonathan Bennett [Bennett, J. (1984). A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 32], if one tries to read the latter half of axiom 3 as claiming anything more than a necessary connection between an effect and its cause, the latter half of the axiom fails to be the converse of the former.

21 In E1P16 Spinoza claims that God is the cause of all things (making all things effects), and in E1P36 Spinoza claims that all things produce effects (making all things causes). Neither of these propositions depends upon Axiom 3.

22 Spinoza uses Axiom 3 to derive three propositions: E1P27, E5P33, and possibly E4P31. None of the demonstrations for these propositions requires the thesis of universal causation.


24 This is not to say that an argument moving from this axiom to Spinoza’s PSR could not be constructed.

25 This position is implied by E1P15–16, and also by E2P3 (‘In God there is necessarily an idea, both of his essence and of everything that necessarily follows from his essence.’) See also E2P7c where Spinoza establishes that ‘God’s power of thinking is equal to his power of acting’ and E1P17S2 where Spinoza equates God’s will with his intellect. None of these propositions or arguments depends on E1A2.

26 See note 5 and note 15 above.

27 This objection is one of Hume’s reasons for questioning of whether we should ‘pronounce it necessary, that everything . . . should also have a cause’: Hume, 2005, p. 54 [THN I. 3.2].

28 This argument culminates in E1P15.

29 Note that Spinoza identifies several self-evident truths that he does not include among his axioms. See for example, E2P17, E2P40, E2P42, E3P4, E4P21, E4P32, E4P39, and E5P28.

30 [From nothing, nothing is made]. Spinoza endorses this principle in Ep. 10: Shirley, 2002, p. 783; and in his Short Treatise, on God, Man and his Well-Being I/83: Curley, 1985, p. 124. It is also discussed in his Descartes Principles of Philosophy: Curley, 1985, p. 242, and 244. For more on this principle’s connection to the PSR and Spinoza, see Pruss, 2006.


In the following discussion I use the expression ‘absolute eternal truth’ to refer specifically to the class of truths that have no place outside the mind. When Spinoza describes the existence and essence of God as an eternal truth (e.g. E1P8s2, E1P20), or when he describes the essences of things (e.g. E1P17n2) and the decrees of God as ‘eternal truths’ (e.g. TTP ch. 4; Shirley, 2002, pp. 430–31) I believe he is using the term in the non-absolute sense described in the TdIE.


E1A6. Spinoza’s doctrine of ideas of ideas adds a bit more complication to the simplistic picture I have here sketched. Despite this complication, the content expressed by an idea of an idea is ultimately sourced in the object of the original idea (see E2P21, E2P22). Thus, this complication will not serve to solve our puzzle.

I use ‘clear and distinct’ to describe the intrinsic denominations of true or adequate representations. There is however ample literature that contests this Cartesian description of the intrinsic denominations. See for example, Radner, D. (1971). ‘Spinoza’s Theory of Ideas,’ Philosophical Review 80(3), pp. 351–59. I remain unconvinced. Throughout the Ethics Spinoza equates ‘clear and distinct ideas’ with ‘true’ or ‘adequate ideas.’ See for example, E1P8s2, E2P36, E2P43p (and scholia).


Existence is also implicated in the ideas of the imagination. See E2P49s. See also E2P26s: The affections of the human body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, though they do not reproduce the figures of things . . . [Note that in E2P17 Spinoza equates ‘present to us’ with ‘actually existing.’]
See E4P1S.

See also E1P20: ‘God’s existence and his essence are one and the same.’ and Ep. 12: ‘. . . solely from its essence and definition it follows that Substance exists’: Shirley, 2002, p. 788.

E2P47.

E2P45, E2P46, E2P47.

See also E1P21: ‘All the things which follow from the absolute nature of any of God’s attributes ["attributes" are what the intellect perceives of God’s essence] have always had to exist. . .

E5P3Idem.

Here I am in agreement with the interpretation offered in Parkinson, G. H. R. (1964). 

Spinoza’s Theory of Knowledge. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 158. ‘He [Spinoza] claims that the existence of modes can be known deductively if they can be shown to follow from the definition of God . . . It seems to be his [Spinoza’s] view, then, that it is possible for the existence of modes to be known both deductively and by experience; though he would add that in the latter case the nature of the modes is not fully understood.’


See Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts I/239 20–33: Curley, 1985, p. 305.

It is worth noting that Hume, a great opponent of the PSR, denies this distinction: ‘To reflect on anything simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other.’ (THN.1.2.6) Hume, 2005, p. 48.

Unless the nature being considered is the nature of God.

Unless the essence represented is the essence of God.

Of course, we can speak of things as existing or failing to exist without assigning a cause or reason, but so too can we speak of round-squares. The claim here concerns conceivability, not language.

Spinoza picks out the causal relationships between things by identifying an explanatory relationship that obtains between certain adequate conceptions of things. Thus, if we can identify an instance of the explanatory relationship, we can identify an instance of causation – even if we do not know or accept Spinoza’s metaphysical account of what causes actually are (i.e. expressions of God’s power).

E1A4.

E1A3.

One might think that given the role of E1A4 in this argument that the PSR is perhaps implicit in this axiom. It is not. E1A4 states that knowledge of an effect depends upon knowledge of the cause. But it is Spinoza’s claim about the conditions of representing a thing’s existence – and not E1A4 – that forces us to place the existence or non-existence of a thing under the category of ‘effect.’


E1P24.

This is not to say that Spinoza’s account of representation does not have metaphysical implications, or vice versa. My point is that Spinoza took the truth of his PSR to be accessible simply from a consideration of how we think.

Strictly speaking there are no representations of self-contradictions. See Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts I/241 9–16: Curley, 1985, p. 307.

Or, in the case of God, the essence is seen as a cause of itself.

Nothing in philosophy is as simple as that. I assess this argument and various objections in an upcoming paper.
And this is also how Leibniz seemed to have conceived of his own principle (at least at some point in his thinking). Leibniz writes: ‘Whoever denies it [the PSR], destroys the distinction between being itself and nonbeing’. Leibniz, G. W. (2005). Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671–1678, R. Sleigh, trans. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 33.

As in Richard Mason’s comment that ‘It is a brute fact for him [Spinoza] that everything has to have a reason’: Mason, R. (1986). ‘Spinoza on Modality,’ The Philosophical Quarterly 36(144), pp. 313–342 at p. 332.

While both philosophers think the PSR is a constitutive principle of reason, Leibniz’s God looks to reason in his actions. Thus for Leibniz the PSR can serve as an explanation for why a state of affairs is actualized or not. For a deeper look into how the PSR serves as a metaphysical principle for Leibniz, see Frankel, L. (1986). ‘From a Metaphysical Point of View: Leibniz and the Principle of Sufficient Reason,’ Southern Journal of Philosophy 24(3), pp. 321–34.

I completed much of the work for this article while visiting the Hebrew University as a George L. Mosse Exchange Fellow. I wish to thank the Mosse Program for their support. I would also like to acknowledge the insights offered by Yakira Elhanan, Steven Nadler, Michael Della Rocca and Eric Schliesser, who each were kind enough to read and comment upon earlier drafts of this paper. I wish also to acknowledge the helpful criticisms offered by anonymous referees.