

## On Sufficient Reason

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Rationalists are great believers in the metaphysical principle of sufficient reason. I will here attack such a principle and show that it leads us into metaphysical befuddlement.

There is a *cause* or *causes* for everything that happens, but there need not be a reason or reasons for everything that happens. We sometimes misleadingly speak as if they are the same thing. But they are not. *Reasons* are one thing; *causes* are another. There need not be a dichotomy or gulf between them, but there is a distinction between them. In that way it is like the fact/value distinction and fact/value dichotomy. There is such a distinction—indeed, a logical or conceptual distinction—between fact and value. But, as Hilary Putnam has well shown, there is not a dichotomy between them (Putnam 2002). Evaluations again and again require factual backing and many, *if* not all, require that for their very intelligibility (Nielsen 2012, 216-24). Similarly, there is a distinction between reason and cause but no dichotomy, no gulf. Hegel was off the mark in claiming that the rational is the real and that the real is the rational (Nielsen). Something need not be real to be rational. Indeed, something can certainly be real without being rational, such as the fact that some people have been buried while still alive. That has happened but it is clearly not true that it is rational. Rape is extensively real but it is not rational. Belief in poltergeists was once real but it was not and is not rational. It was not even a rational belief even in times past. Belief in having a society with universal reciprocal caring is rational and indeed also reasonable, but it is hardly real. There is a lot of uncaring in our societies—in some societies more than others—but it is not for nothing that protesters in the United States are going around with written signs saying ‘Black lives matter’. In

many places in the United States it is not so, as it was certainly not so in apartheid South Africa. It was all too real but it certainly was not rational.

One can see from the above that there is something both positive and negative that philosophy rightly claims here. It is not just a matter of negative exposing of nonsense here, though its 'foundations' (better called, its *rationale*) is engendered by and rests on the setting out of some banal truisms, though often not ideologically unimportant for all of that. But they are also sometimes philosophically relevant remarks, though not esoteric philosophical remarks. Though they clearly are not grammatical remarks, they are also clearly philosophically relevant. They deflate in philosophically cherished puzzles. It is not the case that the key remarks made in the above paragraph are grammatical remarks in the way Wittgenstein used 'grammatical remarks' or in any way grammatical remarks. It is not in so understanding them that many of the claims I make here find their validity. The last one about the lack of reciprocal caring is both empirical and moral. The distinction—a conceptual distinction—between reasons and causes is not undermined or blurred, though the normative importance of that philosophical issue may be put in question.

The principle of sufficient reason is itself a bit of rationalist mythology. But there are still spaces without that *ersatz* principle for giving good reasons for many things, including many of our moral judgments. There are good reasons to believe the sun will come up tomorrow in Iowa but perhaps not in Greenland and that torturing someone just for the fun of it is evil, indeed vile. That this is so holds, no matter how we weigh in on the justifiability of enhanced interrogation going on in the United States.

Nihilism is incoherent, yet it has its vogue. But still there are some evaluative conflicts or at least differences that may very well be intractable without being nihilistic. This gives the lie to principle of sufficient reasons or at least makes it problematic. There very well may be causes for everything that happens but there are not *reasons* for everything that happens. That there must be, as I have said, is a bit of rationalist mythology. Or at least it looks like it surely is unestablished or

perhaps even unestablishable. Reason neither rules the world nor is the world in utter chaos. Though there are good empirical and moral reasons for various things in our actual world—our social, political and moral order. But there are many things claimed that are not reasonable to put it mildly. It is indeed true of our real old wonderful world with its plentitude of unnecessary horrors, often vividly on display but sometimes hidden and sometimes not mentioned by the mass media. Ideology can be very effective, particularly in what it doesn't say. There are not sufficient reasons for everything that is done or doable. We do not find a sufficient reason for everything. We cannot be sure that everything has a reason as we can be sure that everything has a cause and that we must not confuse the two if we want to be clearheaded.

That claim about the pervasive horrors of our world is, of course, logically a contingent matter but unfortunately probably is one that will always remain the case as long as the human animal is around. But that is not true or false in the way that logical or otherwise conceptual remarks are or are establishable. It is rather a factual claim empirically establishable or dis-establishable. It is just likely the way things will always go. But it is surely something that is not philosophically establishable or dis-establishable. It is, however, something to be recognized and to struggle determinedly against with the grim recognition that our struggles will probably be defeated. But we must not let this lessen our resolve to struggle. This is a moral remark and a proper one, but the 'must not' is a moral 'must not' and not a conceptual one, like 'we cannot not argue without a language'. But is there any reason at all to think that this commitment to struggle has a philosophical foundation or rationale? I think not. And even if not, so what? We should go on struggling for a reasonable social order and that is neither irrational nor unreasonable. It may well be reasonable. But it is not *required* by reason. There is no principle of sufficient reason, not even for the things that are necessary for human wellbeing and at the heart of our moralities. Moralities that are so often just so much talk to no effect. As I write this, I think of the horror that is going on in Yemen all by the good graces of Saudi Arabia and the United States.