

The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Asian Thought: Three Case Studies
Ricki Bliss
(For *PSR*, Fatema Amijee and Michael Della Rocca (eds), OUP)

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) looms large over the history of Western philosophy. Although decidedly unfashionable nowadays, the power of the principle, and the shadow that it casts, would seem undeniable. That the world we inhabit is thoroughly and ultimately intelligible is, arguably, a point of view that one needs to be educated out of rather than reasoned into.

If I am right about the pull of the PSR, one might wonder if it has a role, any role, to play in traditions outside our own. In particular, one might wonder if the principle surfaces in Asian thought. Of course, Asia is a big place, and one with an extended and rich intellectual history, so the better question might be: has any Asian thinker or school of Asian thought employed some version or other of the PSR? But if this is the question motivating our investigation, the reader might now wonder if this paper is going to be short, for the obvious and immediate answer must surely be a no. The Asian taste for silence, asceticism, poetry and the mystical connotations of these pursuits, would seem to speak against a thorough-going commitment to the explicability of the universe. Although such a response would appear to be the obvious one, I argue that we ought to, nonetheless, resist it.

In what follows, I offer an extremely cautious exploration of the PSR in the world-views of certain important Asian thinkers. It is cautious for several different, but related, reasons. First, no one of the thinkers I consider explicitly endorses the PSR. This leaves us in a situation in which we must first identify, then hunt for, what I shall call *hallmarks* of the principle. Second, I offer no comprehensive surveys of the systems of thought developed by our thinkers. This is significant because even if a thinker propounds a reason for some fact or thing that we would normally understand as a hallmark of the PSR, it does not follow that they thereby endorse a view according to which *everything* has a reason.

As no thinker that I consider here explicitly endorses the PSR, I begin in §1 by setting out what we in the West recognize as hallmarks of the principle – commitments generated by applications of the PSR in conjunction with additional assumptions. In §2 I introduce the Asian thinkers whose thought will occupy us in subsequent sections – Nāgārjuna, Fazang and Nishida. Why I focus on these three shall be made clearer in due course. In §3, I offer and discuss a shallow response to our question. Finally, I then turn to a more substantive discussion of the principle in §4. Of course, one cannot aim to provide in a single paper (or book, for that matter) a comprehensive survey of the PSR in Asian thought, any more than one can provide in a short space a comprehensive survey of the PSR in Western thought. My aim in this paper is to begin to show – by examining whether the PSR plays a key role in the thought of three thinkers in widely different traditions in Asian thought – how isolating and pursuing the PSR-theme in Asian thinkers is illuminating and valuable.

1. The PSR and how *we* reason with it

According to the full-blown PSR, everything has a reason.¹ Very often, philosophers have acted with restricted or refined versions of the principle, though. As that there are four children in the room or that I exist are both *facts*, a reasonable formulation of the principle says that for every fact F, there must be a sufficient reason for why F is the case.² In order to avoid a need to commit

¹ Della Rocca, 2010.

² Melamed and Lin 2016.

to an ontology of facts, one might, however, prefer a version of the principle which states that for any x , there is some y such that y is the sufficient reason for x . This version of the principle is still extremely strong, though. It demands reasons for necessities, negative facts, and all positive facts, including facts about what is actual and what is merely possible. I shall understand the PSR as the principle according to which, *for each thing that exists or obtains, there is a reason for its existing or obtaining*. Taken after this fashion, I am not obliged to consider explanations for non-existents; nor am I obliged to foist an ontology of facts upon the thinkers whose ideas I will be engaging with in subsequent sections.

The appeal of the PSR, it might seem, finds its starting place in our ordinary experience. Upon entering a room to find its furniture piled high in the centre, no one would shrug their shoulders and say ‘wow, the world really is just full of mystery’. Rather, one would want to know why the furniture was arranged in thus and such a way; and one would quite naturally assume that there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for it. Of course, in this kind of case, the strangeness of the situation prompts us to seek an explanation for its occurring, but the ordinary course of things also happens against a backdrop of assumptions about things having reasons or explanations. We may not know what those explanations are, but this is perfectly compatible with the metaphysical assumption that facts, or a certain subset of them, have them.

But what exactly is a sufficient reason? Historically, the Principle of Sufficient Reason has been associated with both *causation* and *explanation*. More recently, the notion of *grounding* has come to be associated with the principle.³ Just as causes are involved in explaining their effects, so too are grounds involved in explaining what they ground. In what follows, I assume a liberal understanding of sufficient reasons – they are reasons, causes or grounds that serve to explain sufficiently. I am aware that a certain kind of reader might find these claims impossibly imprecise. I offer nothing further by way of elaboration, however, as to do so would carry us too far afield.

1.1 Hallmarks of the PSR

Perhaps the *locus classicus* of discussions of the PSR is in its application in cosmological arguments to the existence of God. It is because the cosmos in its entirety stands in need of explanation that, bearing in mind several other important assumptions, we are pushed to conclude that God must be its sufficient reason. So much philosophical attention has been devoted to the consequences of the PSR in these kinds of limit cases because it is here that we witness many of the puzzles and problems that the principle generates. But if the principle is true, it is as true of toothbrushes and hydrangeas as it is of the existence of the cosmos.

Not losing sight of the fact that the PSR is a principle that, if employed, pertains to ordinary entities is important. The first reason for this is that a system that yields answers to certain kinds of questions – such as cosmological questions – is not *necessarily* a system that makes use of the principle after all. One can imagine a view according to which the cosmos in its entirety has an explanation but hydrangeas and parking violations do not. Perhaps the dearth of explanations is generated by an additional commitment regarding the structure of the world, but whatever those additional commitments are the point remains: assessing whether or not a system of thought makes use of the PSR requires establishing that *all* of the entities that that system commits to have explanations, and not just certain interesting cases of them. Of course, restricted versions of the PSR – say, according to which every contingent thing has an explanation – would not place such a demand on a system of thought, but as we are here considering an unrestricted version of the principle, it behooves us to establish that all entities have explanations.

³ See Bliss 2019 and Dasgupta 2015 for discussions that tie grounding to the PSR.

Second, and conversely, a failure to deliver answers to, say, cosmological questions is not *necessarily* evidence of the failure of the PSR. One reason a system might not yield answers to cosmological questions is that amongst its commitments is that there is no cosmos that stands in need of explanation. Acknowledging this possibility is important, as in such cases a commitment to the PSR will evidence itself in expectations regarding the explicability of more mundane entities. Although a system that renders the ordinary parts of the cosmos explicable will not necessarily be one committed to the PSR, any system that is committed to the PSR will be a system that delivers sufficient reasons for ordinary entities. So, whilst the presence of such sufficient reasons is no guarantee that the principle is in operation, it may well be a hallmark of it. From here, we can then assume:

(1.) Mundane Explicationism: a hallmark of the PSR is the provision of ordinary explanations.

Let us call the question ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ *the cosmological question* or just *the question*. One way of understanding how we might answer this question involves assuming that what we are seeking an explanation for is the existence of the cosmos. Assuming that the cosmos just is the totality of contingent things, the relevant explanatory target, then, becomes the fact that there are any contingent things whatsoever.⁴ An application of the PSR tells us that this fact must have an explanation, so what can or must it be? If something contingent is to explain the fact that there are any contingent things whatsoever, then it, itself, must be amongst the collection of things to be explained. On pain of circularity, though, whatever explains the fact that there are any contingent things, cannot be contingent.⁵ We are forced to conclude that our ultimate explainer must be necessary. From here, the argument moves to the conclusion that the necessary being that explains the fact that there are any contingent things whatsoever is God.

Already, the result is striking. From some, arguably, quite intuitive assumptions – such as the fact that there is a totality of contingent things, a cosmos – the PSR is involved in delivering the result that the only kind of entity apt to explain that fact is God (or the fact that God exists).⁶ These arguments take us from the existence of the cosmos to the existence of a transcendent, necessary, ultimate explainer. From here we arrive at a second hallmark of the PSR:

(2.) Cosmological Explicationism: A hallmark of the PSR is that there is a necessary being that explains the existence of cosmos.

Related to both (1) and (2) is a further consequence of the PSR, namely, that there are no contingent facts without explanations. This gives us:

(3.) Brute Fact Denialism: A hallmark of the PSR is that there are no brute contingent facts.

Finally, A discussion of the hallmarks of the application of the PSR is not complete without consideration of Agrippa’s Trilemma. According to the trilemma, the structure of justification is exhausted by three, mutually exclusive options. In order for a belief to be justified, it must be

⁴ See Maitzen 2013 and Pruss 2006, for helpful discussions of cosmological arguments understood in these terms.

⁵ See Maitzen 2013 for a very interesting discussion of this assumption in the context of what we can think of as classic cosmological arguments. See Bliss 2019 for a discussion of this assumption in the context of grounding-based arguments to the existence of something fundamental.

⁶ On the connection between the PSR and cosmological arguments, Pruss says, ‘...despite some notable dissent, it now appears generally established that once one grants an appropriate version of the PSR, it follows that there is a necessary first cause of the cosmos, that is, of the aggregate of all contingent beings’, Pruss, 2006, p.4.

involved in circular reasoning (coherentism), it must be a member in an infinitely regressive chain of justifications (infinetism), or it must terminate in basic, non-inferentially justified beliefs (foundationalism). The trilemma can be extended to our theory of the structure of the world. The overarching structure of the world as ordered by relations of grounding or ontological dependence, or something of the like, can be foundationalist, infinitist or coherentist. Facts, for example, can be self-explanatory, members of infinitely regressive explanatory chains, or grounded in basic facts which are themselves without explanation. We must choose amongst these three options.⁷

Importantly, each of these options looks to involve a rejection of the PSR. Foundationalism flouts the principle quite straightforwardly, for it involves the positing of basic, unexplained entities. Infinitism, on the other hand, flouts the principle because although infinitely regressive chains of dependence yield all sorts of explanations, not everything that needs an explanation has one; or not everything that needs a certain kind of explanation has it. What this missing something is can be debated, but for the sake of example, let us say that there is no explanation for why anything is whatsoever. Coherentism involves a violation of the principle in more than one way. First, one might be of the view that a self-explanatory fact is just a (brute) fact that has no explanation. Second, as coherentism involves loops, it involves non-terminating explanatory chains. Coherentism, then, suffers the same fate as infinitism. This leaves us with a hallmark now for the *violation* of the PSR:

(4.) Agrippa Exhaustion: A hallmark of the violation of the PSR is a commitment to any horn of the Agrippa Trilemma.⁸

I have passed over an enormous number of subtleties in the aforementioned discussion in silence. In almost every case above, the conclusion that the PSR foists something dreadful upon us is not derived in isolation. One must hold a number of additional, often completely reasonable, assumptions, in combination with the PSR, to arrive at conclusions about what follows from wielding the principle. Owing to the complexities of the views I have expressed above, then, I prefer to think of them as presenting mere *hallmarks* of the principle – evidence that the PSR is in operation, in conjunction with additional assumptions, as opposed to necessary or sufficient conditions on its having been applied (or violated).

But why devote so much attention to the ways in which the PSR has been wielded in the Western tradition? The answer to this question is easy: Asia is without a Spinoza or a Leibniz. Examples of Asian thinkers who formulated an equivalent principle and built their system of thought around it are not forthcoming. This is not to say, of course, that Asian thinkers did not use it, but uncovering evidence of such use will involve looking, rather, for the hallmarks of it, and not an explicit statement of it. Let us turn, then, to Asia.

2. East of the Urals

Asia is a large place, and its intellectual heritage extends itself back to several thousand years before the birth of Christ. Long before Socrates and Plato were laying the foundations for the Western tradition, the Vedas were being read in the Indus Valley, and the *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes) was being worked into a full-blown cosmological system in China. The Asian thinkers and their systems of thought worthy of study are vast and many.

⁷ See Bliss and Priest 2018 for an overview of foundational metaphysics in these terms.

⁸ Melamed and Lin 2016.

Here, I focus upon three important Asian thinkers. The first is Nāgārjuna: the 2nd Century Buddhist whose Madhyamaka or Middle-Way philosophy lays the foundation for not only much Asian Buddhism, but central ideas in Neo-Confucianism, Neo-Daoism, Korean Philosophy, and Japanese philosophy. The second is the 7th Century Chinese Huayan Buddhist thinker, Fazang. Drawing on the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness, Fazang goes on to propound a cosmology that is perhaps the most thorough-going defense of the interdependence of all things that is available in the literature – any literature. Finally, I consider the ideas of the much more contemporary, Nishida Kitaro: important member of the 20th Century Kyoto School in Japan. Nishida draws not only on central Zen Buddhist tenets, but also on the work of seminal Western thinkers such as Aristotle and Kant. Each of the thinkers I have selected is of historical importance and they are also each operating within the Buddhist tradition broadly construed. Importantly, though, each of our thinkers espouses a view that roughly corresponds to a horn of the Agrippa trilemma. Nāgārjuna is an infinitist, Fazang a coherentist, and Nishida a foundationalist.

Nāgārjuna was responsible for founding the hugely influential Madhyamaka school of Buddhism. In his seminal text the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), Nāgārjuna argues for the emptiness of all things, including emptiness itself, the identity of ultimate and conventional reality, the non-existence of the self, the non-existence of causation, even the non-existence of the Buddha, amongst still many other highly heterodox ideas.⁹

The central insight of the MMK is that *absolutely everything is empty*. To understand what this means, we must first understand what it is to be empty. The doctrine of emptiness can be understood as involving both a negative and a positive thesis. According to the negative thesis, to claim that something is empty is to claim that it is lacking in *svabhāva*. To have *svabhāva*, translated roughly, is to have ‘being from its own side’ or ‘own-being’. In terms of the Western vernacular, *svabhāva* has been translated as ‘essence’ or ‘substance’ or both, depending on which aspect of *svabhāva* is at issue¹⁰. Importantly, what the notion of *svabhāva* is tracking is that of (some kind or other of) *independence*. Examples, then, of *svabhāvic* beings are atomic facts, God, prime matter, mind-independent reality and fundamental particles. To claim that everything is empty is to claim that *nothing* has *svabhāva*. Nāgārjuna offers what appears to be the first thorough-going defense of full-blown anti-foundationalism.¹¹

Understood as a positive thesis, the doctrine of emptiness tells us that empty things are *purely dependently existent*. In particular, for Nāgārjuna, everything is causally, mereologically and conceptually dependent – that’s just what it is to be empty. In the language of the Mādhyamika, all existence is conditioned existence. In order to see what this might mean, consider the chair on which I am sitting. This chair was brought into being by the work of machines at some factory (causal dependence), were the parts of the chair not to exist neither would the chair (mereological dependence) and its being a chair is a result of us having the concept of chair (conceptual dependence). According to Nāgārjuna, all it is to be a chair is to occupy a certain position in a field of dependence relations.

Central to the Buddhist worldview is a distinction between the two truths or two realities: ultimate and conventional. Conventionally, selves, heartaches, causal relations and doctrines exist. After all, we talk about them, quantify over them, experience them and develop theories about them. Ultimately, however, they are empty. Ultimately speaking, there are no heartaches, causal powers or

⁹ See Garfield 1995, Siderits 2013 and Katsura, and Westerhoff 2009 for differing but canonical translations, commentaries and discussions of this text.

¹⁰ See Garfield 2002, Siderits 2004 and Westerhoff 2007 for quite different discussions of the central idea here.

¹¹ See Westerhoff 2020 for an elaboration of a view like this in properly Western terms.

selves. This is not to say that they do *not* exist, but, rather, that they are merely *conventionally* real (because empty); and this is the ultimate truth.

The Madhyamaka tradition went on to form the foundations of almost all forms of Buddhism that developed as Buddhism spread north and east across Asia, eventually arriving in Japan. On its way through China, another set of developments took place that are of interest to our study. According to the Huayan school of Buddhism, the structure of conventional reality can be understood after the following fashion:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel at the net's every node, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of the jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that the process of reflection is infinite.¹²

Huayan metaphysics is unusual; and this is true even by the lights of the unorthodox Buddhist tradition that lays claim to it. A school of Mahayana Buddhism, Huayan developed in China during the Tang dynasty, and takes its name from the sutra that inspired it – the Avatamsaka Sutra or the Flower Garland sutra.

The Net of Indra is one of the central metaphors around which the Huayan metaphysic orbits. Everything, according to the Huayan picture, interpenetrates with everything else. In the words of Priest, ‘Huayan Buddhism paints a striking picture of reality as a totality of interpenetrating elements, each of which has a fractal quality, reflecting each of the other elements, as well as the whole itself.’¹³ Fazang embraces the doctrine of emptiness. Where the Huayan metaphysic diverges significantly from other of the Mahayana schools, however, is in the strengthening of the positive thesis to the claim that *everything* depends on *everything else* by way of a totalizing interpenetration relation.

There is more to be said about Fazang’s view, but we shall come to this as our investigation demands it. Finally, let us move on to 20th Century Japanese thinker, Nishida. Lesser known in the West, Nishida was, in fact, an extremely important Japanese thinker. He is credited with being the founding father of the Kyoto School, a network of Japanese thinkers based at Kyoto University trained in the Western tradition, who were also committed Buddhist practitioners. The members of the School were, in various ways, engaged in philosophical projects such as coming to understand the nature and structure of the world and what the good is. The Kyoto School thinkers are a shining example of an attempt made in the 20th Century at something that we would now think of as fusion philosophy.

Perhaps the most famous of Nishida’s ideas is the logic of *Basho* or place.¹⁴ For Nishida, an object is anything that lies in a place (*basho*). Judgements involve a particular lying in the place of a universal. So, to say that Sally is a woman is to say that Sally, the object, lies in the place of the universal woman. Of course, woman as an object also lies in a place – the place of human being. After this fashion, we can see a nesting of places – objects lie in places, where those places are also objects relative to further places. Such is the structure of judgements for Nishida.

¹² Cook 1977, p.2.

¹³ Priest 2018, p.108.

¹⁴ Heisig, Kasulis and Maraldo J.C. 2011.

Is the field of places infinitely extendable? No. According to Nishida, there is a place of all places; what he calls *Absolute Nothingness*. Absolute Nothingness, believes Nishida is Pure Consciousness or True Reality. It is by dint of being emplaced that objects are the object they are. But it is by dint of lying in the place of Absolute Nothingness that objects get to be at all.

We have enough by way of preliminary introductions to get a sense for the lie of the land. In spite of all sharing core Buddhist commitments, the views of Nāgārjuna, Fazang and Nishida differ in important ways. Much more of this will be made in coming sections. For now, though, let us consider ourselves introduced to our Asian thinkers and move on.

3. The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Asian Thinking: A shallow response

Returning to our motivating question: do Asian thinkers make use of the PSR? One might think that the immediate and obvious answer is no. Perhaps the most obvious reason for this is that it's not obvious that an Asian thinker has *explicitly endorsed* the PSR or, indeed, built an entire system around it. There is no Indian or Japanese Leibniz, no Spinoza from Shanghai.

For reasons that probably reflect the vagaries of human preoccupations, East Asian thinkers also seem never to have been particularly concerned with modality. Even where thinkers are clearly concerned with metaphysics and ethics, we do not see evidence of worries over possibilities or necessities. In keeping with this, we see no evidence amongst the Asian traditions of the positing of a necessary being that serves as the ultimate ground of everything else. In addition to this, Buddhist thinkers, at least, are *explicit* that there are certain kinds of questions that one ought not to ask. Importantly, amongst these questions include: 'why does all of this exist?', 'is the cosmos finite or infinite?'. Nāgārjuna is very clear that not only is he not interested in answering such questions, but we shouldn't be asking them in the first place.¹⁵ If the asking and answering of cosmological questions are hallmarks of the employment of the PSR, then the flat-out refusal to engage with such questions looks like a flat-out denial of that principle that we, in the West, so often believe to be motivating them.

But perhaps the most compelling reason to suppose that the PSR has no role to play in Asian thought is its (Asian thought's) association with mysticism.¹⁶ Although a denial of the PSR does not entail mysticism, it is not unreasonable to suppose that mysticism entails a denial of the PSR. The flight into mysticism looks to be a direct denial of the thought that *everything* (possibly even anything) has a reason or explanation for its existence. The silence of the mystic is not simply – if ever – silence on the question of what one ought to have for dinner, but, rather, silence as a result of coming to understand something of profound importance about the nature of reality, namely, that it is mysterious.

From here, though, to infer that Asian thinkers do not employ the PSR is too quick. Far too quick. The shallow response is just that, shallow. Ultimate grounds don't necessarily have to come in the form of transcendent necessary beings. Violations of the PSR can, without careful reflection, be confused with cases in which it is simply inapplicable. The silence of the mystic can be strategic and highly informative. In order to understand what, if any role, the PSR is playing in Asian thinking – or at least in the little corner of it that we are investigating – we must look at things more closely.

¹⁵ Garfield 1995, ch.11.

¹⁶ When discussing Munitz, Dean says, 'the mark of a genuine sense of mystery, he says, is precisely that no explanation is forthcoming'. Dean 2019, p. 92.

4. The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Asian Thinking: A less shallow response

First, some caveats and a clarification. To establish whether or not the thinkers we are considering here endorse the PSR is an enormous project. Not only would it require extensive *philosophical* investigation, but it will be doubly burdened by the demands of *exegetical* consistency. In what follows, I offer not uncontroversial but nonetheless established interpretations of the relevant positions and rely on the reader's understanding of the limitations on what can reasonably be achieved in the space of a paper.

A second caveat: as modal considerations have not motivated Asian thought, in what follows, we will abandon hallmarks of the PSR that rely on such considerations – in letter at least, but, as we will see, not in spirit.

The clarification: there is a difference between *using* the PSR and *endorsing* it. If my opponent endorses the PSR, I might then use that principle in an argument to serve as a *reductio* on my opponent's view. Whether I endorse the PSR, in such a case, is irrelevant. My opponent, on the other hand, does believe that everything has a sufficient reason for its existence and can, thus, be said to endorse it. Furthermore, there is a distinction between using and/or endorsing a principle and *holding a view that happens to be consistent with it*. Matters here are very complicated. I will say something more about these issues at the end of the paper, and will content myself with an exploration of whether the standards of the principle can be seen to be met by our thinkers.

The PSR tells us that everything has a sufficient reason for its existence. In order to evaluate whether we have reasons to believe our thinkers might be employing the principle, we must look for its hallmarks in their systems. Importantly we must aim to establish both whether they appear to assume that everything has a *sufficient reason* for its existence and that *everything* has a sufficient reason for its existence. Let us begin by addressing the former.

4.1 Sufficient Reasons

Nāgārjuna: Recall from the previous section that the central insight of the *MMK* is that everything is empty, where what it is to be empty is to be causally, mereologically and conceptually dependent. If we are to suppose that causation, mereological and conceptual dependence relations are kinds of determination relations, and relations involved with explanation, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Madhyamaka worldview is one committed to things as having sufficient reasons.

There are a few wrinkles here, however, that need some ironing out. In the Madhyamaka tradition, we see a distinction drawn between causes and *conditions*. So, whilst the seed is the cause of the tree, the soil, presence of oxygen, and so on are its conditions. Assuming that mereological dependence is a kind of grounding relation, we can draw a distinction between *full* and *partial* grounds. In this case, the wheel of the chariot merely partially grounds the existence of the chariot, with all the chariot parts taken together serving as its full (mereological) ground. If conceptual dependence is something like a grounding relation, we can note a similar pattern – let us say that the concept of chariot is partially grounded in the concept of horse-drawn transportation device.

These examples are introduced in service to two points. The first of these is that not every instance of dependence serves as a sufficient reason. The existence of a wheel is not sufficient for the existence of the chariot. Second to this, our background metaphysics helps determine what counts as a sufficient reason for the existence of something. A certain type of realist, for example, will think that the existence of particles arranged chariot-wise will count as sufficient for the existence of chariots. An idealist, on the other hand, will think that minds with (the right kind of) concepts are sufficient. There will be disagreement over the details, but one way of understanding the Madhyamaka worldview is one according to which congeries of causes, parts and our concepts

will be sufficient for the existence of chariots. And as with chariots, so too with everything else. If everything is purely dependently existent, then those dependence relations will generate sufficient reasons.

One final wrinkle. Whether or not the relevant dependence relations generate sufficient reasons will also depend upon how we understand those relations. Jay Garfield (2002) has urged us to understand Nāgārjuna as endorsing a kind of Humean regularity account of causation. What characterizes the nexus of causes and conditions on such a view is the absence of any necessary connections between cause and effect, explanans and explananda. What the Humean reading of Nāgārjuna entails is a rejection of the view that causes determine their effects. So too, one assumes, for the other dependence relations as well. On this kind of reading, that dependence relations generate sufficient reasons is much more difficult to sustain.

Fazang: We come, then, to Fazang. Continuous with the Buddhist tradition in which he is operating, Fazang embraces the notions of causal nexuses – comprised of causes and conditions – and the doctrine of emptiness. In a departure from the Indian traditions, Fazang claims that the elements of the causal web *interpenetrate* with one another and are *mutually identical*. What we are to make of these claims admits of substantial variation in the literature. I will focus on the interpretation developed by Priest.

For Fazang, as with Nāgārjuna, a house is purely dependently existent. Recall from above, the Huayan view employs the metaphor of the jewel net of Indra. Everything, for the Huayan, is reflected in everything else. The contents of reality interpenetrate and are identical with one another. To claim that my laptop is the same as your laptop, is, unless something strange has happened, not to claim that we share but one computer. Instead, what such a claim probably means is that our two machines are *qualitatively similar* – perhaps they are both Macs. When Fazang speaks of things, wholes and parts, for example, being identical, this identity is qualitative, and induced by everything's sharing in the fundamental property of *emptiness*.¹⁷ Just as our laptops are identical insofar as they are both Macs, everything is identical to everything else insofar as everything is empty.

To understand how this amounts in interpenetration, however, requires an additional step. Priest understands emptiness graph-theoretically: what it is to be empty is to be a locus in a field of relations. Now, recall that ultimately everything is empty, in which case, ultimate reality – emptiness – must be empty too. So, emptiness is itself a locus in the field. Suppose my right shoe is empty. Ultimate reality then appears in the field of relations involved in the existence of that shoe. Similarly, my right shoe appears in the field of relations involved in the locus that is emptiness. Thus, it can be said that my right shoe and emptiness interpenetrate each other. If we assume that the interpenetration relation is transitive, then by dint of their interpenetration with emptiness, the objects of conventional reality, tables, chairs and people, *all* interpenetrate.

As we can see, the interpenetration of all things is mediated by their relationship to emptiness. My existence interpenetrates with the existence of the Pacific Ocean because we are both empty. That said, in terms of the fixing of existence and identity, location within the web matters. Those things proximate to me in the net – my parents, my parts, the nation that nurtured me – are the things that can be said to serve as reasons for my existence, as was the case with Nāgārjuna.

Nishida: By now, a pattern is emerging. This should hardly be surprising. After all, what Nāgārjuna and Fazang were concerned to establish (amongst other things) was how the world *really is*. Although this goal was in service to a spiritual end – as opposed to a purely epistemic one – the fact remains that what our thinkers so far have been concerned with is delivering accounts of how things are. So too with Nishida.

¹⁷ See Jones 2018 for an account that disagrees on this point.

Recall that for Nishida what it is to be an object is to lie in a place. There are no objects not emplaced. What it is to be a person is to lie in the place of *human being*, which is itself in the place of *mammal*, and so on. But what is it to lie in a place? One useful guide is to look to the subject-predicate distinction. From the sentence ‘Harriett is a hedgehog’, we can infer that Harriett – the object – lies in the place of *hedgehog*. This place ‘envelops’ Harriett. Importantly, *hedgehog* is not, as pertains to Harriett itself an object. Rather, for Harriett, lying in the place of *hedgehog* is what allows the object Harriett to be an object (and that object that she is). In order to better understand the relationship between an object and the place(s) it lies in consider actors on a stage. The stage is not itself (at least in the normal course of things) an object in the performance. Rather, it is that against which the performers can be considered particular kinds of objects, namely, actors.¹⁸

Places are loci of differentiation. Or perhaps better to say, it is being emplaced that affords the differentiation of objects. It is in virtue of lying in various places that Harriett is, and is the thing that she is. From here, it is but a quick step to understand the structure of Nishida’s places and their relationships to objects in terms of metaphysical dependence relations.¹⁹ Harriett’s being the kind of thing that she is is metaphysically determined by the places in which she lies. Her being metaphysically depends on those places. And from here, it is reasonable to conclude that Nishida’s account, as with his predecessors’, provides sufficient reasons for the existence of things.

4.2 Ordinary Explanations

Having addressed the issue of whether or not our three thinkers are even in the right business, namely, the business of delivering sufficient reasons, it might seem obvious that the question of ordinary explanations has also been addressed. Recall the following hallmark of the PSR:

- (1.) Mundane Explicationism: a hallmark of the PSR is the provision of ordinary explanations.

It is important to slow down here, however, as it does not follow from the fact that Nāgārjuna, Fazang and Nishida can be shown to deliver sufficient reasons that their systems are such as to meet (1.). As Buddhists, Nagarjuna and Fazang’s accounts might bring trouble in their wake. If everything is empty, so the thinking might go, then nothing really exists after all. And if nothing exists, then there are no ordinary things or happenings to have sufficient reasons. If everything is ultimately grounded in Absolute Nothingness, as it is for Nishida, nihilism isn’t far behind.

To be empty, recall, is to be purely dependently existent, and the doctrine of emptiness interacts with the two truths/realities insofar as it is (ultimately) true that everything is empty (ultimate reality) and merely conventionally real (conventional reality).²⁰ Historically, interlocutors have expressed the concern that what Nāgārjuna is endorsing is a kind of crippling nihilism. If everything is empty, thinks Nāgārjuna’s opponent, then nothing exists whatsoever. Nāgārjuna, however, is quick to counter this claim. Not only is it false to understand emptiness in terms of non-existence, but perhaps more dramatically, it is *because* things are empty that they are able to enjoy any kind of existence or reality in the first place. Of course, the opponent is of the view that possessing svabhāva is a necessary condition on existing. Nāgārjuna is at great pains to argue, however, that svabhāvic entities *cannot* exist. The very notion of svabhāva, argues Nāgārjuna, is metaphysically incoherent. It is the proponent of svabhāvic being, believes Nāgārjuna, who imperils the possibility of existence and not him.

¹⁸ This analogy is adapted from Casati and Fujikawa (*forthcoming*).

¹⁹ See Casati and Fujikawa (*forthcoming*).

²⁰ An example of a conventional truth is that Australia is in the southern hemisphere.

The threat to ordinary existents posed by the doctrine of emptiness is obviated for Fazang as it is for Nāgārjuna. One may worry that as a form of coherentism, however, Fazang's account simply cannot work. But whether or not this is the case is not my concern. What matters for our purposes is that *Fazang* believes there to be rafters, golden lions and nets.

Although Nishida is operating against a background of Buddhist practice, he is not explicitly in the business of developing a Buddhist worldview. For this reason, we must be careful to not simply assume that where Nāgārjuna goes, Nishida follows. Grounding the existence of objects on Absolute Nothingness might seem to smack of the same nihilism that opponents have charged the Mādhyamika with. Recall, though, that for Nishida, Absolute Nothingness is Pure Consciousness or True Reality. Absolute Nothingness is the ultimate condition for the possibility of existence – it is the field in which objects arise. The existence of the ordinary – and their having reasons – is also secured for Nishida.

4.3 Cosmological Explicationism

We come now to what many will consider the heart of things – the issue of whether or not *everything* has a sufficient reason for its existence, where that everything includes the existence of the cosmos in its entirety. In the Western tradition, God has typically been wheeled out in service to this particular end, yielding the following:

(2.) Cosmological Explicationism: A hallmark of the PSR is that there is a necessary being that explains the existence of cosmos.

Asian thinkers, however, are not concerned with modality. Distinctions were not drawn between contingent things that stand in need of explanation and necessary things that do not. Thus, no Asian thinker has been concerned with the positing of a necessary being that explains the cosmos. If (2.) is the benchmark for the full and proper application of the PSR, then our investigation of the principle in Asian thought is over.

Recall, though, that the question that led thinkers such as Leibniz to appeal to the necessary being that is God to serve as the sufficient reason for the cosmos is one that does *not* make appeal to modal considerations, namely, ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’. And, as we might expect this question – or the spirit of the question – was well-known to Asian thinkers.

The Buddhist literature, however, is not shy on recommendations regarding the asking of kinds of cosmological questions. We shouldn’t be asking them. But why is this? A question is *soteriologically valuable* just in case asking it is valuable to the enlightenment project. A question is not soteriologically valuable just in case the asking of it is not valuable to the enlightenment project. Questions such as ‘why does all of this exist?’, thought the Buddha, were not of soteriological significance. Note, though, this is to say *nothing* about whether or not they have answers or whether they are otherwise legitimate. That there are answers to questions such as ‘why does all of this exist?’ is perfectly compatible with a view according to which we ought not be asking such questions because they are irrelevant for enlightenment.

This point aside, Buddhist thought does not involve a blanket ban on cosmological questions – just a ban on the ones of no soteriological import. Buddhist thinking is dripping with big picture, ultimate concerns and it is to some of these that we shall now turn.

Nāgārjuna: Nāgārjuna’s predecessors in the Abhidharma tradition were happy to concede that cowherds, chariots and urns were mere conventional existents—they are dependently existent. What the Abhidharma were committed to, however, was the idea that undergirding these

conventional existents were things that were ultimately real, the dharmas: ungrounded, independently existent entities.

In developing the idea that *everything* is empty, Nāgārjuna denies the existence of dharmas: there are no ultimately real entities that undergird the existence of everything else. Everything, then, is merely conventionally existent and this – the emptiness of all things – is the ultimate truth. But what are we to make of ultimate and conventional reality now? If everything is ultimately empty, is emptiness not somehow the ultimate nature of things or somehow ultimately real?

Matters here are extremely delicate. The issue to hand is a difficult one, and attempt at dealing with it is made even harder by the variety of available interpretations. What we can say, however, is that as everything is empty, ultimate reality, emptiness, must be empty too. Ultimate reality, in being empty is itself purely dependently existent. Taking a table as an example, in a discussion of the emptiness of emptiness, Garfield states, ‘but now let us analyze... the emptiness of the table, to see what we find... Nothing at all but the table’s lack of inherent existence. The emptiness depends upon the table. No conventional table – no emptiness of the table... Emptiness is hence not different from conventional reality – it is the fact that conventional reality is conventional. Hence it must be dependently arisen, since it depends upon the existence of empty phenomena’.²¹ Were there no table, there would be no emptiness of the table – without the table, there is nothing to predicate the emptiness of. In this sense, then, emptiness is dependent and therewith, conventionally existent.

Now, if the reader is perplexed, they are right to be. If nothing else, the dalliance with contradiction here seems obvious.²² This issue aside, what bearing has any of this on our discussion of the PSR? One might wonder if ultimate reality – emptiness – is an example of something that would, for Nāgārjuna violate the principle. What I have shown here, however, is that as everything is empty, and thus dependently arisen, even emptiness itself must be empty as well. And as emptiness – ultimate reality – is dependent, then like hyacinths and marriages, it also has reasons. The PSR appears not to have been violated.

Fazang: Turning to Fazang, let us turn our attention away from the notion of emptiness – which Fazang also embraces – and focus, instead, on the net of Indra. Of course, the net is a metaphor for the structure of reality, but it allows us to frame an important question for the purposes of our investigation. What about the net itself? Does it have a reason for its existence? We know that the jewels in the net depend upon the other jewels – indeed, all of them. So, tablecloths, pianos and asteroids have reasons. But what about the entire net? Perhaps the net is fundamental. In the case of the Western tradition, the criticism has often been levelled against various forms of coherentism that they are ultimately forms of foundationalism, for the entire coherent structure turns out to be ungrounded and thus fundamental. If the web for Fazang is ungrounded, then we might find ourselves with a violation of the PSR.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the Huayan cosmology, the net is as dependent as everything else. The route to such dependence might just seem obvious. Perhaps the net eliminatively reduces to the jewels that comprise it – the net just is nothing over and above the jewels arranged net-wise. Alternatively, perhaps we can argue that the net is dependent upon the jewels that compose it, in much the same way that a table is dependent upon its parts. But neither of these options look to be quite the one that the Huayan takes. Instead, Priest suggests we understand the net as follows:

... if all Shi [conventional phenomena] interpenetrate, then any shi [conventional phenomenon] interpenetrates with any of its parts. Moreover, the whole which is the Net of Indra can be thought of as itself a shi. It is, after all, reality as described by Huayan; and because it is described, it is part of

²¹ Garfield, 2002, pp.38-39.

²² See Garfield 2002 (with Graham Priest) ch.5, for example.

conventional reality, that is a shi – the maximal state of affairs. The whole Net of Indra is a node in its own net!²³

The totality of conventional things that is the Net of Indra interpenetrates with, and thus enters into dependence relations with, its parts. But in being itself a conventional thing, the net must also be a jewel in the net that reflects and is reflected back in everything else. The net, as with pot plants and horizons is as dependent as everything else. In the totality of all things, for the Huayan, we find no violation of the PSR.

Nishida: We come finally to Nishida. Is there a totality of all things that goes unexplained, or the positing of some ultimate explainer or other?

To explore this question in Nishida, we must return to his logic of places. Recall that to be an object is to lie in a place. Recall also that relative to a given object, the place is nothing (relative nothingness); it is not an object but, rather, the background against which an object can be the thing that it is. But these places can also be objects themselves that lie in additional places. My shoes can lie in the place of *red*, and that redness can be an object that lies in the place of *colour*. Does the hierarchy of places extend indefinitely? No, it does not. All places lie in the place of all places which, for Nishida, is Absolute Nothingness or Pure Consciousness.

We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted by Nishida's appeal to nothingness, nor by its connection to mind. Instead, let us focus on the kind of metaphysical structure that Nishida is advancing here. The logic of places looks to be a kind of foundationalism: there is a hierarchy of places that ultimately lie in Absolute Nothingness. Absolute Nothingness, as the place of all places, cannot be emplaced and is, therefore, fundamental. We look to have at least one thing, then, that violates the PSR, namely, Absolute Nothingness.

But to end our story here is to not tell the whole of it. Absolute Nothingness, in not lying in a place, cannot be an object. But look at what we are doing now – we are talking about it and ascribing at least one property to it, namely, the property of not lying in a place. Absolute Nothingness looks to lie in a place – the place of not lying in a place – and, thus, of being an object after all. What I am describing here is Absolute Nothingness as a *dialethea*, and the view it is embedded in as what Casati and Fujika have described as *para-foundationalism* – Absolute Nothingness both is and is not fundamental.²⁴ I can convince the reader of neither the viability of this interpretation of Nishida's view nor of the viability of para-foundationalism. What I would like to bring to the reader's attention, however, is the following: if we grant that places provide reasons, then Absolute Nothingness both does and does not have a reason. On the one hand, it lies in a place. On the other hand, it is not emplaced and, therewith, without a reason.

The foundationalist reading of Nishida looks to give us one thing that violates the PSR – Absolute Nothingness – and the dialethic reading delivers something that both does and does not. We must be very careful here, however. If we understand the principle as saying that *everything* has a reason for its existence (or obtaining), then in not being an object, Absolute Nothingness does not fall foul of it – the principle simply doesn't apply to it in the first place. The foundationalist reading delivers no violation. On the para-foundationalist interpretation, Absolute Nothingness both does and does not have a reason, from which it follows that it has a reason. Para-foundationalism yields no violation of the principle either.

²³ Priest, 2018, p.122, [] my own.

²⁴ Casati and Fujikawa (*forthcoming*).

4.4 Brute Fact Denialism

By now it should be obvious that both Nāgārjuna and Fazang deliver views that eschew the obtaining of brute facts – contingent or otherwise. Things are slightly more complicated with Nishida, but it is reasonable to infer that he delivers no such facts either. A candidate example of a potential brute fact for Nishida is the fact that Absolute Nothingness exists. But if what it is to be for Nishida is to be an object, then no such fact can obtain. Recall that on the dialetheic reading, Absolute Nothingness both is and is not an object. It is an object because it lies in a place and, therewith, has a reason. Once again, we avoid the positing of a brute fact.

4.5 Agrippa Exhaustion

We come finally to the matter of Agrippa exhaustion. Recall from 1.1:

(4.) Agrippa Exhaustion: A hallmark of the violation of the PSR is a commitment to any horn of the Agrippa Trilemma.

Our three thinkers roughly correspond each to one horn of the dilemma: Nāgārjuna is an infinitist, Fazang a coherentist and Nishida a kind of foundationalist. Although our survey has not been exhaustive, we have good reasons to believe that the three views we have discussed do not result in the violation of the PSR.

It is from here that I believe much can be learned from the Asian traditions. I cannot possibly do this thought justice and will settle for some cursory observations. The doctrine of emptiness as it is espoused by the Mahayana traditions ensures that everything has an explanation. There is not some totality of things, or the fact that there is something rather than nothing, that is left out. Indeed, one might even go so far as to understand Nāgārjuna's denial of such spooky entities as beings with *svabhāva* as a commitment to the thorough-going explicability of the universe. On the one hand, in denying the existence of anything with independent existence, Nāgārjuna is denying the existence of anything fundamental – there is no metaphysical bedrock. On the other hand, in claiming that all existence is conditioned, Nāgārjuna seems to be committed to the thought that there is nowhere to hide. There is no point at which appeal to essences or intrinsic natures or substances, or any of their associated metaphysical trappings, is acceptable. If Nāgārjuna is correct, there *is* always a further story to be told, even if we don't yet know how to tell it.

Fazang's inclusion of the net as a node within the net allows the coherentist to avoid collapsing into a kind of foundationalism. This comes at the price of accepting symmetric and reflexive dependence relations, but this needs not be a catastrophe: identity- and existence-fixing relations can be non-symmetric.

The grounding of objects and places in Absolute Nothingness provides two means by which foundationalism can be sustained without violating the PSR. On the consistent reading, as Absolute Nothingness is not a thing, that it doesn't have a sufficient reason is not tantamount to a violation of the PSR – after all, the principle just says that *everything* has a reason for its existence. On the inconsistent reading, Absolute Nothingness both does and does not have an explanation, in which case the PSR is not violated either.

5. Conclusion

An enormous amount of territory has been covered. By way of conclusion, I would like to offer one final remark. There is a difference between employing a principle, endorsing a principle and holding

a view that is compatible with that principle. One might think that the difference between these last two possibilities is merely a matter of words. It is important to acknowledge that at best, what I have shown here is that our three thinkers appear to espouse views that are *consistent* with the PSR. Perhaps more important, still, is to acknowledge that the metaphysical views put forward by Nāgārjuna, Fazang and Nishida are not views born from the conviction that the world is thoroughly intelligible. On the contrary, such deep-seated rationalism seems antithetical to the Buddhist worldview in which all three of our thinkers are soaked. That a kind of rationalism appears to be compatible with what we might think of as kinds of mysticism is yet another clue as to how interesting exploring the PSR in Asian philosophy might turn out to be.

Bibliography

Bliss R., 'What Work the Fundamental?', *Erkenntnis*, vol.84, no.2 (2019), pp. 359-379.

Bliss R and Priest G., 'The Geography of Fundamentality', in Ricki Bliss and Graham Priest (eds) *Reality and its Structure: Essays in Fundamentality*. Oxford University Press (2018).

Casati F, Fujikawa N., 'Inconsistent Metaphysical Dependence: Cases from the Kyoto School', in Deguchi Y and Garfield J (eds), XX. Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

Cook F., *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*. Pennsylvania University Press (1977).

Dean T., *Metaphysics and Mystery: The Why Question East and West, Volume II*. iUniverse (2019).

Deguchi Y and Fujikawa N., 'Dialetheism in the Work of Nishida Kitaro', in Yasuo Deguchi, Jay L Garfield, Graham Priest, Robert H Sharf (eds), *What Can't be Said: Paradox and Contradiction in East Asian Thought*. Oxford University Press (2021) pp. 123-142.

Della Rocca M., 'PSR', *Philosopher's Imprint*, vol.10, no.7 (2010) pp.1-13.

Garfield J., *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford University Press (2002).

Garfield J., *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mulamadhyamikakārikā*. Oxford University Press. 1995.

Heisig J, Kasulis T and Maraldo J C., *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*. University of Hawaii Press (2011).

Jones N., 'Huayan Metaphysics in Fazang's *Huayan Wujiao Zhang*: The Inexhaustible Freedom of Dependent Origination' in *Dharma and Dao: Chinese Buddhist Philosophy*, Sandra A. Wawrytko and Youro Wang (eds). Springer (2018).

Maitzen S., 'Questioning the Question', *The Puzzle of Existence: Why is there something rather than nothing?*, Tyrone Goldschmidt (ed). Routledge (2013), pp. 252-271.

Melamed Y and Lin M., 'Principle of Sufficient Reason', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Priest G., *The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay in Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuskoti*. Oxford University Press (2018).

Priest G., *One: Being an Investigation into the Unity of Reality and of its parts, including the Singular Object which is Nothingness*. Oxford University Press (2014).

Pruss A., *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment*. Cambridge University Press (2006).

Siderits M and Katsura S., *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mulamadhyamikakārikā*. Wisdom Publications (2013).

Siderits M., 'Causation and Emptiness in Early Madhyamaka', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol.32, no.4 (2004), pp.393-419.

Westerhoff J., *The Non-Existence of The Real World*. Oxford University Press (2020).

Westerhoff J., *Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction*. Oxford University Press (2009).

Westerhoff J., 'The Madhyamaka Concept of Svabhāva: Ontological and cognitive aspects', *Asian Philosophy*, vol.17, no.1 (2007), pp.17-45.