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# Why does God exist?

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**Abstract: Many philosophers have appealed to the PSR in arguments for a being that exists *a se*, a being whose explanation is in itself. But what does it mean, exactly, for something to have its explanation 'in itself'? Contemporary philosophers have said next to nothing about this, relying instead on phrases plucked from the accounts of various historical figures. In this article, I analyse five such accounts – those of Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz – and argue that none are satisfactory. Should we abandon or restrict the PSR, then? I think that would be hasty, for many reasons. I therefore consider the prospects of explaining everything, including God, given the constraints of certain features of good explanations, and conclude with several observations about future approaches.**

'Nothing exists without a reason . . . From this it follows that even if we assume the eternity of the world, we cannot escape the ultimate and extramundane reason for things, God.' So writes Leibniz, famously deducing theism from what he called his 'great principle', the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). 'Assuming this principle', he writes elsewhere, 'the first question we have the right to ask will be, *why is there something rather than nothing?*' Suppose Leibniz is right: there is nothing whereof we cannot ask why it exists, and from this we can infer God exists. Why then, we might ask, does *God* exist?

Indeed, as Terence Penelhum has observed, 'if it is puzzling that *anything* exists, it should seem puzzling that *God* does' (Penelhum (1960), 176). Simply referring to God as the ultimate and extramundane reason for things is not enough to satisfy the explanatory demand of the PSR. 'To complete it', Penelhum rightly notes, 'more has to be built in: the being referred to has to be one whose existence . . . is self-explanatory' (*ibid.*).[1] And this is exactly what theists of yore have said. God is not just a necessary being; God is a being whose reason for existing is 'in itself' or 'in the necessity of its own nature'. Contemporary defenders of PSR-based cosmological arguments simply repeat these phrases. But what do they



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mean, exactly? How is God's explanation 'in' Himself? I analyse what five prominent historical figures have said about this – two mediaeval (Anselm and Aquinas) and three modern (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz). While much more substantive than what we find among philosophers today, what they say is, I argue, ultimately unsatisfactory.

Should we abandon or restrict the PSR, then? I think that would be hasty, for many reasons. But as a matter of good methodology of rational inquiry, positing something brute and inexplicable still carries a cost, which one may want to pay only as a last resort. I therefore consider the prospects of explaining everything, including God, given the constraints of certain features of good explanations. Insofar as that is our goal, I conclude with several observations about future approaches.

## Anselm's analogy

In the third chapter of the *Monologium*, Anselm argues that 'there is a certain Nature through which whatever is exists and which exists through itself, and is the highest of all existing beings' (M, III, 87). Although his argument for this conclusion is predicated upon considerations about ontological dependence, it should not be confused with his more widely known ontological argument for a necessary being in the *Proslogium*. Here we see Anselm arguing not for a being which merely exists necessarily, but one that exists 'through itself' (*a se*) and not through another (*ab alio*).

Anselm's argument takes its cue from the principle that 'everything that is, exists either through something, or through nothing. But nothing exists through nothing. For it is altogether inconceivable that anything should not exist by virtue of something. Whatever is, then, does not exist except through something' (M, III, 87). Clearly, for Anselm, to 'exist through' or 'exist by virtue of' something is for it to have its *reason for being* in something. When *a* exists through *b*, or exists by virtue of *b*, the reason for *a*'s existence is *b*. It is inconceivable that something should exist by virtue of nothing, that is, lack a reason for its being. The main principle here, in other words, is the PSR.[2]

Anselm gives several arguments for the conclusion that there must be some one thing that exists through itself as opposed to through another. What interests us is how Anselm conceives of 'existence through itself' (*existendi per se*). Towards that end, we should consider first what Anselm means by 'existence through' more generally. He writes:

> But it is clear that one may say, that what derives existence from something exists through the same thing; and what exists through something also derives existence from it. For instance, what derives existence from matter, and exists through the artificer, may also be said to exist through matter, and to derive existence from the artificer, since it exists through both. That is, it is endowed existence through both, although it exists through matter and from the artificer in another sense than that in which it exists through, and from, the artificer. (M, V, 91)

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One thing 'exists through' another when it *derives its existence* from the other. The statue's existence is derived from its matter and artificer. Furthermore, although there are different ways a thing might exist through something else (the statue depends on its matter in one sense, on its artificer in another), there are common features of derivative existence generally:

> Since the same meaning is not always attached through the phrase, 'existence through' something, or, to the phrase, 'existence derived from' something, very diligent inquiry must be made, in what way all existing beings exist through the supreme Nature, or derive existence from it. For what exists through itself, and what exists through another, do not admit the same ground of existence . . . For, what is said to exist through anything apparently exists through an efficient agent, or through matter, or through some external aid, as through some instrument. But whatever exists in any of these three ways exists through another than itself, and it is of later existence, and, in some sort, less than that through which it obtains existence. (M, VI, 92)

In all cases where something, *a*, exists through another, *b*, we can say: (i) *a* is not identical to *b*, (ii) *a* owes its existence to *b* in some way, and (iii) *a* is ontologically posterior to *b*. Something that does *not* exist through another, by contrast, lacks these features, and 'derives existence from itself' (M, V, 91–92). Anselm explicitly denies, however, that something's existing through itself is to be understood in terms of causing itself, efficiently, materially, or otherwise. 'The supreme Substance', he says 'did not create itself, nor did it spring up as its own matter, nor did it in any way assist itself to become what it was not before' (M, VI, 94–95). Anselm is not imagining that God pull Himself up into being by His own bootstraps, as it were.

Having clarified what it cannot mean for the supreme Substance to exist through itself, Anselm offers an analogy to help us imagine what it does mean:

> As to how it should be understood to exist through itself, and to derive existence from itself: . . . it seems best to conceive of this subject in the way in which one says that *the light lights* or is *lucent*, through and from itself. For, as are the mutual relations of *the light* and *to light* and *lucent* (*lux*, *lucere*, *lucens*), such are the relations of *essence*, and *to be* and *being*, that is, *existing* or *subsisting*. So the supreme *Being*, and *to be* in the highest degree, and *being* in the highest degree, bear much the same relations, one to another, as *the light* and *to light* and *lucent*. (M, VI, 95)

One wishes that Anselm elaborated further on this analogy, but alas, this single paragraph, which is as fascinating as it is puzzling, is all we get. What can we gather from it?

As per the analogy, it is the nature of a light (noun) to be, when lit (verb), luminous (adjective). Light is what it does when it's doing it, so to speak. But what about the supreme Being is analogous? What would it mean to say that it is of the nature or essence of the supreme Being (noun) to be/exist, when it is being/existing (verb), being-*y*/existence-*y* (adjective)? Surely it would take Anselm's analogy too far to read into these verb and adjective forms of 'being' as having ontological significance akin to an *actus purus* ontology of the divine nature. Nor should we read into Anselm here an uncompromisingly strong doctrine of

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divine simplicity. It is of course true that Anselm thinks it is of the essence of God to exist. He takes that to be demonstrable from his ontological argument. But light is not, after all, identical to luminosity, at least as Anselm must have thought of it: for luminosity is just how bright a light appears to us.[3] He says, with that respect to the supreme Being, that essence, existence, and existing 'bear much the same relations' to one another as do light, being lit, and luminosity, relations he describes as mutual.

Some caution is needed here, however, because Anselm explicitly rejects the possibility that things could exist mutually through each other: 'But that these beings exist mutually through one another, no reason can admit; since it is an irrational conception that anything should exist through a being on which it confers existence. For not even things of a relative nature exist thus mutually, the one through the other' (M, III, 88). This seems to be a straightforward rejection of circular ontological dependence between two (or more) things. Anselm must have a different kind of mutual relation in mind, where the relata, while not identical, are also not separate in the way two wholly distinct beings are. Be that as it may, if light is distinct, even if not separable, from its being lit, there does not seem to be any mutual relation here, for light is itself caused to exist; that is, it exists through something prior to it. Light, as a substance, does not consist merely of being lit or being luminous. Those are properties light has posterior to being, even if a light, while lit, is essentially *ipso facto* luminous.

In the end, it's unclear what Anselm's analogy, when carried over to essence, existence, and existing, amounts to. After his own analysis, John Morreall thinks Anselm's proposal is no more than a grammatical confusion:

> The only sense in which light seems to be *per se* is a grammatical sense. Unlike a substance such as a horse, which performs activities which are referred to by using verbs and adjectives predicated of the noun 'Horse', light is itself an activity and so can be referred to by either the noun *light*, or the verb *to shine*, or the verbal adjective *shining*. With light there is not some thing and also the activity it performs, as there is, say, with a horse and the horse's running. The noun *light* refers to the same thing as *to shine* and *the shining* (*thing*) do. In this sense we can say that 'all by itself' or *per se*, if you will, light shines or is something shining. (Morreall (1984), 39)

That 'light' can be used as both a noun ('the light in the cave') and verb ('I light the cave') is an artefact of language, not the metaphysics of light as some kind of dynamic substance whose being is what it does. Without the additional metaphysical resources to interpret being as act, as Aquinas found in Aristotle, Anselm's analogy of how light exists 'through itself' by at once *being called what it does* fails to illuminate how the supreme Being exists through itself.

### Aquinas and the E = ∃ thesis

The first three of Aquinas' esteemed Five Ways appeal to beings which call out for explanation: beings which change, beings which are caused to exist, and

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beings which are contingent, respectively. Such beings, explained as they are by other things ('causes'), must ultimately answer to a being that answers to no other. Such a being, Aquinas says, exists not through another as its cause, but 'through itself' (OBE IV.7), and is 'through itself a necessary being' (SCG I.22.2).

But, crucially, just as we saw in Anselm, for Aquinas, to be *through itself* a necessary being is not the same as merely having necessary existence. The Third Way, recall, arrives at the existence of a certain *kind* of necessary being, one that exists *by the necessity of its own nature*. This is because an infinite regress of necessary beings, each depending on another, would be just as problematic as a regress of contingent beings each depending on another (OBE IV.7; ST I.2.3). There therefore must be something 'having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity' (ST I.2.3). Thus in his masterful, wide-ranging study of Aquinas, Norman Kretzmann attributes to him the following PSR: every existing thing has a reason for its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other being(s) (Kretzmann (1999), 65–66).

The question now is what it means for something to be 'through itself' a necessary being, or have its 'reason for its existence in the necessity of its own nature'. This time, however, we get some aid from the Aristotelian concepts Aquinas adopts. For a thing to be caused to exist is for it to have its existence (matter, in most cases) conjoined to an essence (form).[4] For a thing to undergo change or movement is for some potentiality in that thing (inherent in its form or essence) to be actualized. For a thing to be contingent is for it to be a matter-form composite, for its matter and form might never have been conjoined. Thus what the first three of Aquinas' Five Ways take as their *explananda* are things whose essence is distinct from their existence. All things whose essence and existence are distinct are ontologically dependent entities whose existence is explained by prior existents (SCG I.22.2).

Given this metaphysical framework, all the arguments converge in their own way on a being (unmoved mover, uncaused cause, and necessary *per se*) whose essence is not distinct from its existence. What Aquinas means by a being that exists by the necessity of its own nature, then, is a being whose essence is its own unique act of existing (*ipsum esse subsistens*). Unlike everything else which finds its explanation in another, God *is* His own existence, and so has His explanation 'in Himself'.

It may be questioned, however, whether the concept of a being whose essence is identical to its existence is coherent (hereafter I will refer to this as the 'E = ∃ thesis'). As Aquinas says, such a being does not exist like anything else, but rather is existence itself (SCG I.22; I.38.5). This is remarkable in its oddity. Supposing that God could be pure subsistent existence is like 'supposing that something could be a shape, without being the shape of anything but that shape, or be a shadow, without being the shadow of anything but that shadow' (Hughes (1989), 21). Just as I know what it means for things to have a shape or

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shadow, I know what it means for things like rocks, trees, and people to have existence, even if I don't know what the best philosophical analysis of 'existence' is. I know what ordinary existence claims mean well enough to offer and analyse claims about the existence of more peculiar things like numbers or subatomic particles or angles and demons. But on Aquinas' view, God 'exists' in some radically different sense – so radically different that I don't know what 'God exists' means. And how would one argue for 'God's existence' if God doesn't have existence like other things do? Surely the Five Ways are meant to demonstrate that something *in particular* exists ('et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum'), not just that 'there is' existence *simpliciter*,[5] or that some thing* exists*, the asterisks signifying reference to we know not what.

The conceptual difficulties continue. Aquinas thinks there is a real distinction between essence and existence in creatures. There is something we can refer to as a creature's essence, E, and something else we can refer to as a creature's existence, ∃. Assuming the standard view of identity, for any creature, $\Box(E \neq \exists)$. When it comes to God, however, $\Box(E = \exists)$.[6] But if the meaning of '=' in both cases is the same, the meaning of 'E' and '∃' cannot be, since $\Box(E \neq \exists)$ is logically equivalent to $\sim\Diamond(E = \exists)$. What is meant by 'E' and '∃' when speaking about creatures, and when speaking about God, cannot be the same.[7] So the $E = \exists$ thesis is really an $E^* = \exists^*$ thesis, the asterisks again signifying reference to we know not what. Alternatively, one might hold that 'E' and '∃' are univocal, it's just that they can be identical in some cases (God's) but not others (creatures). In this case, the $E = \exists$ thesis is really an $E =^* \exists$ thesis, '=*' signifying reference to a non-standard view of identity. Either way, the thesis is about as clear as mud.

Wholly apart from these conceptual difficulties, it is unclear how the $E = \exists$ thesis is explanatory. It is widely agreed that mere identity, as a reflexive relation, is not an explanatory relation. 'If anything has appeared obvious about explanation', Robert Nozick writes, 'it has been that the explanatory relation is irreflexive' (Nozick (1981), 181). This of course is a well-known problem facing reductive accounts of mental states in philosophy of mind, but it faces the $E = \exists$ thesis no less. Given the Aristotelian framework Aquinas adopts, it is clear how the existence of other things are explained: as matter-form composites, their existence is explained in part by their form and matter (internal causes), and in part by what conjoins them (external causes); that is, causes them to exist, 'cause' understood broadly to include not just efficient causes, but final causes as well (Gilson (1937), 80). But when it comes to a being whose essence is existence, none of those explanatory elements are present.

In fact, Aquinas explicitly rejects the possibility that such a being – God – could depend on *anything*, as any form of dependence entails existing 'through another', be it internal or external (SCG I.13.5–10; I.22). A being that truly exists through itself, Aquinas believed, must therefore be absolutely simple, altogether lacking parts (SCG I.18; I.20–27).[8] Now, it is not that it's hard to see how an absolutely simple being could have an explanation of its existence; rather, it is easy to see

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how it couldn't. Clearly there are no explanatory resources external to it that could help, since it exists independently of anything else. Just as clearly, there are no internal explanatory resources, since there are no real distinctions between anything in an absolutely simple being. There's just nothing in there for an explanatory relation to squeeze between. An independently existing, absolutely simple being just *is*, and is without explanation. It is for this reason that Brian Leftow (2003) argues that Aquinas should not be read as endorsing the PSR Krentzmann attributes to him; everything is explicable *except* God.[9] Either way, the explanatory demand of the PSR is not satisfied with respect to God.[10]

## Descartes on God's causal explanation

In the cosmological argument of *Meditation III*, Descartes is interested in the explanatory ground not of, say, contingent beings, but of the very idea of God. But the main structure of his argument follows a familiar pattern where chains of explanatory dependence bottom out in a being which exists *per se*. Descartes, however, offers a new gloss, saying such a being 'derives its origin from itself' and 'possesses the virtue of self-existence' (HR I, 169).

The fact that Descartes's own correspondents struggled to understand exactly what he meant by these descriptions bodes ill for us. Does Descartes mean to say God exists *per se* in the merely negative sense of being underived or uncaused, asks Caterus, or does he mean a bolder, positive sense of being 'derived from its own self as from a cause' or to have 'conferred its own existence on itself'? Descartes replies with a clear-cut PSR: 'The light of nature certainly tells us that nothing exists about which the question, why it exists, cannot be asked' (HR II, 14). This PSR is, in fact, the first of his ten 'axioms or common principles', and so the existence question 'may be asked even concerning God' (HR II, 55). And when it is, Descartes answers:

> But it seems to me self-evident that everything that exists springs either from a cause or from itself considered as a cause; for, since we understand not only what existence is, but also what negation of existence is, we cannot feign that anything exists *per se* as to which no reason can be given regarding why it exists rather than not exist; hence there is no reason for not interpreting self-originated in the sense in which it implies causal power, that power, to wit, which passes all bounds, and which, as we can easily prove, can be found in God alone. (HR II, 16–17)

It would seem that God, on this account, somehow preserves Himself in existence by the positive operation of His own causal power. But Descartes's understanding of 'cause' here is highly qualified.[11] In his reply to Arnauld, Descartes also explicitly rejects the possibility that God is His own efficient cause, as if He bootstraps Himself into existence (HR II, 111). Further, God 'does not conserve Himself by any transeunt action, or any continual reproduction of Himself' (HR II, 108) as He would were He is own efficient cause. Again, the relevant causal concept is not 'the peculiar and restricted meaning of efficient cause' (HR II, 15), but is

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'another species of cause analogous to an efficient cause' (HR II, 15). So how is the causal concept here different from, but analogous to, efficient causation?

It is different from efficient causation in two ways: the cause is not prior to its effect, and it is not distinct from its effect. Although 'that statement is manifestly true when the meaning of efficient cause is restricted to those causes that are prior in time to their effects or different from them, yet it does not seem necessary to confine the term to this meaning in the present investigation' (HR II, 14) – that is, investigation into what sense God is the cause of Himself. But even in ordinary cases of efficient causation, Descartes says, the cause may not be prior to its effect, at least temporally (HR II, 14). Thus, God's causing Himself need not be understood as God's somehow being prior to Himself, temporally or otherwise, for, he rhetorically asks, 'Who does not know that the same thing can neither be prior to nor different from itself?' (HR II, 14).

The relevant causal concept is analogous to efficient causation in that efficient causes have the *power* to conserve or preserve their effects in being, and God exercises such power *in excelsis* with respect to Himself (HR II, 14, 16). This, Descartes thinks, is the key to a positive conception of self-existence demanded by the PSR. The merely negative sense of existing *per se* (underived or uncaused) is fine as it goes, but

> if we have previously enquired why He is or why He continues in being, and having regard to the immense and incomprehensible power which exists in the idea of Him we recognize that it is so exceedingly great that it is clearly the cause of His continuing to be, and that there can be nothing else besides it, we say that God exists *per se*, no longer negatively but in the highest positive sense. For, although we need not say that God is the efficient cause of His own self, lest, if we do so, we should be involved in a verbal dispute, yet, because we see that the fact of His existing *per se*, or having no cause other than Himself, issues, not from nothing, but from the real immensity of His power, it is quite permissible for us to think that in a certain sense He stands to Himself in the same way, as an efficient cause does to its effect, and that hence He exists *per se* in a positive sense. (HR II, 15–16)

He goes on, noting that the existence of beings which clearly do not exist *per se* but depend on something else (such as ourselves) conceptually requires one that does exist *per se*, boldly announcing that 'here I will add a statement I have not hitherto made in writing – that we cannot arrive merely at a secondary cause, but that the cause which has power sufficient to conserve a thing external to it must with all the more reason conserve itself by its own proper power, and so exist *per se*' (HR II, 16). Not quite satisfied with this, Arnauld managed to draw Descartes a bit further out still. Descartes writes in response:

> For those who follow the guidance of the light of nature alone, spontaneously form here a concept common to efficient and formal cause alike. Hence, when a thing is *derived from something else* it is derived from that as from an efficient cause; but what is *self-derived* comes as it were from a formal cause; it results from having an essential nature which renders it independent of an efficient cause. (HR II, 109)

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> Although we do not enquire for an efficient cause with respect to a thing's essence, nevertheless we can do so with regard to its existence; but in God essence and existence are not distinguished; hence we may enquire about the efficient cause of God. But in order to reconcile those two matters, we should reply to the question as to why God exists, not indeed by assigning an efficient cause in the proper sense, but only by giving the essence of the thing or formal cause, which, owing to the very fact that in God existence is not distinguished from essence, has a strong analogy with the efficient cause. (HR II, 113)

Having 'pursued this topic at somewhat greater length than the subject demanded' (HR II, 114), with a detectable note of frustration, Descartes says no more.

One gets the impression that, pressed by Caterus and Arnauld, Descartes retreats in substance, if not in word, to the Scholastic view of aseity, namely, that God's being identical to His essence makes it such that God is causeless, or perhaps better, *à la* Scotus, uncausable.

Impressions aside, a more wholistic interpretation would be as follows. God does not have an efficient cause in the strict sense for two reasons: first, negatively, because something being its own efficient cause is incoherent (HR II, 108); second, positively, because the 'inexhaustible power, or immensity' (HR II, 108) of God's essence 'renders it independent of an efficient cause' (HR II, 109). Yet there is something analogous to an efficient cause in God's essence, a 'concept common to efficient and formal cause alike' (HR II, 109), something 'intermediate between efficient cause, in the proper sense, and no cause' (HR II, 110). It is like an efficient cause because it is an effective power and is genuinely explanatory (the function of an efficient cause, according to Arnauld), and like a formal cause because that explanation is in terms of God's *essence*, which is 'not distinguished' from His existence.

Perhaps Descartes is right that the relevant causal concept is 'self-evident' to those who follow the natural light of reason (HR II, 109); I, however, feel more like I'm groping in the dark for it. There are passages that suggest Descartes thought formal causation alone would do, such as when he says in a March 1642 letter to Huygens,

> you say 'God is the cause of himself.' Several people have in the past misinterpreted this phrase, and hence it would appear to require some such explanation: 'For something to be the cause of itself is for it to exist through itself, and to have no other cause than its own essence, which may be called a formal cause.' (CSMK, 213)

But saying God is His own formal cause is not, I think, all there is to Descartes's view (*contra* Christofidou (2013) and McBrayer (2018) ).[12] Despite notoriously distancing himself from Scholastic niceties, Descartes does seem to have in mind the classic Aristotelian sense of formal cause as explanation in terms of a thing's essence ('in taking the entire essence of a thing as its formal cause here, I merely follow the footsteps of Aristotle' (HR II, 112); see also Flage & Bonnen (1997) ). The formal cause of a statue is its shape. The formal cause of a house is its design or blueprint. But in these cases, the formal cause and the thing itself are distinct. The statue is not identical to its shape; other things could have

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the same shape. The house is not identical to its blueprint; the house might never have been built. Yet Descartes said God's essence and existence are 'not distinguished'. Moreover, formal causes, in these mundane examples, do not constitute a sufficient reason for a thing's existence, but enter into a thing's total explanation along with the other Aristotelian causes. God, however, has no other causes.

If the usual concept of a formal cause by itself will not do, then we are left to conclude that he had in mind some *sui generis* causal concept, just as he implied in, for example, HR II, 15–16, 113. Perhaps this is why Descartes gestures towards God's essence *qua* formal cause as having a unique kind of power that makes God actually exist, and so is on that account akin to an efficient cause.[13] But, once again, Descartes takes back with one hand what he seemed to give with the other. He does appeal to God's unique power as playing some explanatory role, but denies that God's essential power to exist should be understood in terms of a positive operation of will (HR II, 14, 108, 112). Understandably so, for it is exceedingly puzzling what that could even mean. Are we to imagine God's existence being explained by a distinct formal cause in the manner of, say, Escher's famous paradoxical lithograph of two hands drawing themselves into existence? Presumably not, for there an efficient cause sneaks back into the picture (the hands themselves), rendering it viciously circular. Besides, it should not be forgotten that for Descartes, God's essence, existence, and power are not *actually* distinct. How, then, can there be any order of explanation between essence, existence, and power? It's as if Descartes wants to find in God's essence something as genuinely explanatory as an efficient cause without any of the properties thereof responsible for its explanatoriness – productive power and distinctness from the effect (one thing, the cause, exercising a power to produce an effect, a different thing). He wants the semblance of the thing without the thing. The goods without the cost.

In the end, we are left to understand 'God's essence is such that He exists by His own power' in the merely negative sense that God, unlike everything else, does not exist by the power of anything distinct and prior to Himself. The puzzling and provocative descriptions of God's being His own cause notwithstanding, Descartes gives no clear answer to the question of why God exists. But it is Spinoza even more than Descartes who is most closely associated with the claim that God is the cause of Himself.

### Spinoza on God as *causa sui*

According to Michael Della Rocca, 'Spinoza employs the PSR more systematically, perhaps, than has ever been done in the history of philosophy' (Della Rocca (2008), 30).[14] He thinks Spinoza's commitment to the PSR was so unconditional and absolute that he dubs it 'rationalism on steroids' (*ibid*., 3).

Although some dispute this reading of Spinoza (see Garber (2015) ), its justification is plain. The first two of his axioms in the *Ethics* together sound very much like

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a now familiar PSR: 'Everything which exists, exists either in itself or in something else' (Ia1); 'That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself' (Ia2). To exist 'in' or to be 'conceived though', for Spinoza, is to exhibit what Roger Scruton calls a 'rational dependence', where B rationally depends on A just in case A makes B's existence and nature intelligible (Scruton (1986), 36–37). For our purposes it suffices simply to say that rational dependence is explanation. Thus, everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in itself or in something else. Leaving no room for doubt, Spinoza again asserts a clear-cut PSR in Ip11: 'For every thing a cause or reason must be assigned either for its existence or for its nonexistence . . . Now this reason or cause must either be contained in the nature of the thing or be external to it' (Cf. Ip8s2).

Spinoza does not, however, advance a traditional cosmological argument where a chain of beings leads to God. He rejects transitive chains of dependence that trace back to the existence of some extramundane being. But Spinoza certainly believed that there is an ultimate reason for things. Everything, he argues, necessarily depends on and is constitutive of a single infinite substance, identified as God, who is 'the immanent, not transitive, cause of all things' (Ip18. Cf. Ip28s) – including God Himself.[15]

It is that last part, the eyebrow-raising notion of God as *causa sui*, which concerns us. The reason Spinoza thought of God as *causa sui* is straightforward: everything has an explanation. There is ultimately only one thing or substance (Ip5dem), the 'absolutely infinite Entity or God' (Ip11s). That thing has an explanation. But since there's nothing besides that thing, that thing's explanation cannot be in terms of anything beyond or external to it (Ip6; Ip18dem; Ip11s), nor can it 'be produced by anything else' (Cor. Pr. 6). We are left to conclude it 'is therefore self-caused' (Ip7) (cf. Scruton (1986), 38).

But is not the idea of something being self-caused, to use Arthur Schopenhauer's phrase, a *contradictio in adjecto*, akin to a man who stands on a chair to reach the clasp on his tall hat, or worse, a man 'on horseback and sinking into the water, gripping his horse with his thighs and lifting himself and the animal up by means of his own pigtail, with the words *causa sui* underneath' (Schopenhauer (F), 21)? Della Rocca thinks this reading is unfair, and that Spinoza has an easy reply:

> One might, however, object to the notion of self-causation in the following way: causes must exist before their effects, so for a thing to cause itself it must exist prior to itself, which is absurd. Spinoza, however, simply rejects this restrictive notion of causation, and his assimilation of causation to explanation helps us to see how he can do this: to say that a thing is self-caused is nothing more than saying that it is self-explanatory, and this is indeed how Spinoza views a substance. (Della Rocca (2008), 50)

If we are not to equivocate something's being self-caused with its being self-explanatory, how, then, are we to understand something's being self-explanatory?

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We need look no further than the opening line of the *Ethics*: 'By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing' (Idef1). For Spinoza, as already mentioned, the ideas of substance and that which is *causa sui* are coextensive: since 'substance cannot be produced by anything else (Cor. Pr. 6) and is therefore self-caused [*causa sui*]', he says, it must be the case that 'its essence necessarily involves existence; that is, existence belongs to its nature' (Ip7dem). Hence, substance is also described as that 'which is in itself and is conceived through itself' (Idef3) and 'which exists solely from the necessity of its own nature' (Idef7).

Just as we saw in Descartes, Spinoza's initially intriguing and provocative language of something's being *causa sui* reduces to the old E = ∃ thesis, which Spinoza explicitly affirms (Ip20: 'God's existence and his essence are one and the same'). Harry Wolfson comments:

> This state of being causeless, which the mediaevals as well as Spinoza himself usually designate by the expression 'necessary existence,' Spinoza also designates by the expression 'cause of itself' (*causa sui*), a phrase which had already been in current use in philosophic literature. *Causa sui*, like the mediaeval 'necessary existence,' is primarily nothing but a negation, meaning causelessness and to Spinoza it is only a shorter way of saying that the essence of substance involves existence . . . It is from this that it is deduced that God is . . . not conditioned by any other cause nor in any other way dependent upon another being, . . . and that He is the source of the existence of everything else. (Wolfson (1934), 127, 128)[16]

Unfortunately, therefore, Spinoza's notion of God as *causa sui* sheds no new light on the question of how God's existence itself is explained, as required by the PSR to which he is so unconditionally and absolutely committed.

### Leibniz on existence flowing from essence

The *locus classicus* of PSR-based cosmological arguments for the existence of God is, of course, Leibniz's. Several different versions of the PSR can be found throughout Leibniz's corpus, including the canonical 'Everything that exists, exists through something.' He writes, 'If something is through something else, then it has a reason of existing outside itself; that is, it has a cause.' But if something 'is though itself, then its reason of existing is taken from its own nature' (AG, 184). Thus, like others before him, Leibniz described God as not just a necessary being, but one whose reason for existing is in His own nature or essence, thereby supposedly satisfying the explanatory demands of the PSR. But, true to form, he had something unique to add.

For Leibniz, anything that exists exists *because of* its essence. Essences, he thinks, have a sort of built-in 'propensity' for existence. He writes: '[S]ince something rather than nothing exists, there is a certain urge for existence or (so to speak) a straining toward existence in possible things or in possibility or essence itself; in a word, essence in and of itself strives for existence' (AG, 150). As he goes on to say, this 'striving' comes in degrees, the strength of which is proportionate to an

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essence's degree of perfection. Their degree of perfection is determined by, roughly, how many other things ('requirements') limit their being. By way of analogy, just as an object in motion travels uniformly unless acted upon by external forces, a thing's degree of perfection, and hence hold on reality, is limited to the extent that the same in other things are 'in the way of' its being (AG, 20). Nothing limits God's being, however, His essence being supremely perfect.[17] To continue the analogy, God's essence, being supremely perfect, is like an object in motion which cannot possibly be met with resistance. Its propensity for existence is therefore maximal and unabated – necessary existence follows, or perhaps better, *flows* from it. Accordingly, one might think Leibniz's account doesn't rely on an E = ∃ thesis as much as it does an E ⇒ ∃ thesis, where the '⇒' is the special 'flows' relation. What to say?

First and foremost, '⇒' is not to be understood along the lines of efficient causation. Only things which exist through other things have efficient causes. Rather, God's essence is a non-causal *reason* for God's existence.

Even so, how can God's essence be an explanatory resource for God's existence without itself *existing*? As Leibniz himself says, 'existing things cannot derive from anything but existing things' (AG, 152). Mustn't God's essence already have a 'foothold in existence' (to use Robert Adams' phrase (Adams (1994), 176) ) before it can have a propensity to exist? Adams' phrase is particularly apt, as on this account, thanks to His essence, God appears to bootstrap Himself into being – the same metaphysical absurdity in Spinoza which earned Schopenhauerian invective.

Adams is sensitive to the apparent absurdity. He writes: 'It seems that he [Leibniz] explains God's existence by God's essence, and he explains the reality of all essences, including God's, as depending on God's existence' (*ibid.*, 176). In other words, because Leibniz also thought that all essences and necessary truths in general ultimately depend on God (e.g., AG, 218–219), the apparent circularity is that, on the one hand, essences exist because God exists, but on the other, God exists because His essence is such that He must exist. If 'because' and 'dependence' here are understood as relations of priority, the circularity is plain. And there is reason to treat them that way: to meet the explanatory demand of the PSR, they *must* be explanatory relations where one thing is explained by reference to something prior. So understood, I don't see any way around the vicious circularity of saying both that God's essence is prior to God's existence and that God's existence is prior to God's essence.

In defence of Leibniz, Adams cautions that 'we must be careful . . . not to foist on Leibniz claims of priority to which he is not committed' (*ibid.*, 185). Adams suggests that all Leibniz needs to say here is that there is a *mutual* dependence between God's existence and God's essence in the same way there is between necessary truths and God's understanding. He writes:

> Whatever relations of explanation and metaphysical dependence Leibniz supposes to obtain among these, he cannot consistently suppose that any of them is independent of any of the

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> others in the sense that there is a possibility of its obtaining without them, for he does not believe that there is any possibility of any of them not obtaining. All necessary truths are in this way inseparable from each other . . . His argument . . . does not imply that God's understanding is naturally prior to the necessary truths. It does imply that the truths could not exist without being understood by God, and that is supposed to explain what sort of being the truths have. But it is equally part of Leibniz's view that God could not exist without understanding exactly those necessary truths. Neither could exist without the other. (*ibid.*, 185)

Because anything at all entails a necessary truth, there are mutual entailment relations between necessary truths. For example, if '1 + 1 = 2' and 'whatever has a shape has a size' are necessary truths, then each will entail, without seeming prior to, the other. Thus we find in Leibniz, according to Adams, not an $E \Rightarrow \exists$ thesis, but an $E \Leftrightarrow \exists$ thesis, where '$\Leftrightarrow$' is something like mutual modal entailment.

Unfortunately, this sort of relation just doesn't seem robust enough to deliver the requisite explanatory goods. There remains an apparent explanatory asymmetry between God's understanding and necessary truths that is not there between ordinary cases of mutual necessary entailment. God's understanding explains what necessary truths there are, not vice versa, even if just those necessary truths modally entail that they are understood by God. The same is true of the relation between God's essence and existence, as, according to Leibniz, the divine essence's propensity for existence is supposed to explain God's existence. In both cases, the former is explanatorily prior to the latter, even if each mutually entails the other on account of their necessity. To all appearances, God's essence *is* 'naturally prior'. So what, then, explains *it*?[18] It has a maximal propensity to exist, we are told. But it must first exist to have a propensity to exist. If, in the end, there just is no distinction between God's essence with its maximal propensity to exist and its existing, then we are once again back to the $E = \exists$ thesis or one similar.

## The UPSR

'If everything has a cause, then what caused God?' So goes the common objection to 'the' cosmological argument that no philosopher of repute has ever defended. This fact has not deterred philosophical freshman and professional alike from triumphantly raising it, however, which has led more keen observers to label it 'the straw man that will not die'.[19] Amazingly, the straw man has been alive and well for more than a century. One finds Richard Clarke, for instance, complaining of it in his logic text from the 1880s! In all fairness, the beloved straw man may owe its endurance in part to the wide range of meanings the word 'cause' has had in metaphysics generally, and in cosmological arguments in particular. There are, of course, Aristotle's four causes, but it is also not uncommon to see any of them referred to as grounds or reasons, or seemingly interchangeable uses of the terms 'cause', 'ground', and 'reason'.[20]

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This being the case, as Clarke goes on to clarify, the objector may be confusing the theist's appeal to a law of causality with a different law:

> This Law is sometimes stated in another form and invested with another name. It is sometimes called the *Law of Sufficient Reason*, and expressed in the formula: *Everything existing has a sufficient reason*, or, *Nothing exists without a sufficient reason*. The Law as thus formulated has a wider range than the Law of Causation. The Law of Causation is applicable only to things which are created, the Law of Sufficient Reason to God the Creator as well. (Clarke (1989), 70)

*Everything*, including God. It is no straw man, therefore, to ask 'then what's God's explanation?' No doubt such an unrestricted PSR (hereafter UPSR) that gives rise to our question, despite its eminent pedigree, will strike many contemporary ears as unduly strong. Indeed, it often seems as if there's a running contest to see who can articulate the most modest PSR that still has extramundane implications.[21] But theists – and philosophers in general – should not be so quick to distance themselves from the UPSR for several reasons.

Aristotle famously remarked in the preface to the *Metaphysics* that philosophy begins in wonder. As explanations are found first for 'obvious difficulties', we advance little by little to 'greater matters' such as 'the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and finally about the genesis of the universe' (982b 13–17). This quest for explanations of things doesn't diminish when applied to 'greater matters', it intensifies, whether you take the explanatory ultimate to be God, the universe, or something else. So it is not surprising to see the UPSR front and centre in that quest, as it is in the accounts surveyed here, among others.[22] Contemporary philosophers should keep in mind that while appealing to some restricted PSR may have certain dialectical advantages, dressing modestly is only a virtue in public. It is the UPSR that drives naked rational inquiry.[23]

Furthermore, the most common arguments for the PSR – that it is a necessary presupposition of reason, that it underlies inference to the best explanation, that it is self-evident, that it is heretofore exceptionless, that denying it entails radical scepticism – all seem wholly general, supporting not just some modest PSR, but the UPSR. It is also worth pointing out that the UPSR assumed throughout above, as formulated about the existence of things, is not subject to the problem of modal collapse which faces restricted formulations about contingently true propositions or facts.[24]

Moreover, if any PSR gives purchase to Leibniz's pre-eminent question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?', it is the UPSR. The question, after all, is not 'Why is there something contingent rather than not?' The proper contrast is between existence and non-existence, the former but not the latter requiring explanation, since 'nothing is simpler and easier than something' (AG, 210).[25] Thus, interpreted *prima facie*, Leibniz's question is really a statement with an unrestricted universal quantifier: for any $x$, if $x$ exists, there is a reason for $x$'s existence. In this way, the UPSR is actually *simpler* than a restricted PSR; the latter

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invites the additional question of why the scope is restricted to some particular domain. Those who prefer some restricted PSR will have to answer Schopenhauer's accusation of treating the need for explanation like a taxicab to hire and dismiss when it suits one's purposes (see Gale & Pruss (1999), 469). Unlike a taxicab, the canonical PSR – the UPSR – rides you along with everything else to *its* destination.

### Explaining everything

For the sake of the metaphysically bashful, let us set aside the UPSR as a metaphysical principle. Just as a matter of good methodology of rational inquiry, positing something brute and inexplicable still carries a cost, which one may want to pay only as a last resort. We should push the chain of explanations as far as possible.

Although it is common to stop explanation at the foot of necessity, even this can be bad practice. A necessary being might well be a good ultimate explanation of the chain of contingent beings, but a chain of necessary beings will no less require ultimate explanation in something relevantly different. There is nothing about necessity just as such that is buck stopping, as made evident by the fact that attempts to explain various necessities are commonplace. Moral properties and truths, for example, are often thought to be necessary, yet they seem positively to cry out for explanation (see Adams (1999), Ganssle (2000) ). We recognize this even with respect to beings whose essence implies necessity. Certain abstract objects, such as numbers, are such that if they possibly exist, they necessarily exist. That is their nature. And yet, even if we infer from this *that* they exist, we recognize that explanations of *why* they exist are not thereby foreclosed. Do they exist in virtue of a certain function and properties, as Bob Hale has argued (Hale (2013), 175ff.) )? Are they, along with other *abstracta*, the by-product of God's mental and causal activities, as many theists have contended (Leftow (2012) )?

The point is worth emphasizing, as it might be thought that the central problem with the accounts of Anselm et al. is whether necessary existence is coherent and intelligible. Not only would that be to misunderstand them, but philosophers have to my mind shown the concept of necessary existence to be perfectly coherent and intelligible (see Plantinga (1974) and Pruss & Rasmussen (2018) ).

The problem, rather, is how there can be an explanation of something which exists *a se* (necessity and aseity are often erroneously conflated). And it's hard to see how there can be, given precisely the structural features of explanation presupposed in arguments for a being that exists *a se*. All of the philosophers we looked at (with the possible exception of Spinoza), among many others, offer variants of something like the following argument. No thing can bootstrap itself into being any more than something can come from nothing; beings have explanations (UPSR). But beings can't be explained by other beings 'all the way down' in the manner of turtles. Nor can beings explain each other in a circle. The chain of

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beings explained by other beings must therefore be grounded by something whose explanation is in itself.[26] QED. Note carefully how the structure of explanation here is assumed to form a strict order (it is irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive).[27] Yet when it comes to explaining the being that exists *a se*, all the accounts we looked at renege on this assumption. The E = ∃ thesis seems to require God's explanation to be reflexive. Anselm's mutual relations between *essence*, *to be*, and *being* seem to require explanation to be symmetric, as does Leibniz's E ⇔ ∃ thesis. But if we reject reflexive (bootstrapping) and symmetric (circular) explanations when explaining beings which exist *ab alio*, why accept them when explaining a being which exists *a se*?[28]

## Conclusion

On the assumption that we don't wish to abandon the UPSR, I want to make three concluding observations about the goal of articulating a workable account of how a being that exists *a se* is explained.

First, it must be said that the doctrine of divine simplicity is an impediment to this goal. When it doesn't explicitly come to the fore in the accounts we looked at, the E = ∃ thesis lurks in the background, always threatening to leap in to prevent philosophical progress. On any account of how a being can have its explanation 'in itself', the being must have an internal structure rich enough to be genuinely explanatory. If divine simplicity doesn't allow for that, so much for divine simplicity.

Second, while we should respect *as much as possible* the structural features of explanation presupposed in our arguments for a being that exists *a se*, it does seem that something's got to bend with respect to the being itself. Here we would do well to appreciate Robert Nozick's point that the Leibnizian question – Why is there something rather than nothing? – 'cuts so deep that any approach that stands a chance of yielding an answer will look extremely weird' (Nozick, (1981), 116). He continues: 'Someone who proposes a non-strange answer shows he didn't understand this question. Since the question is not to be rejected, though, we must be prepared to accept strangeness or apparent craziness in a theory that answers it' (*ibid.*). Thus we should be prepared for and tolerate *some* degree of strangeness in an account of how something can have an explanation in itself, so long as it is coherent and intelligible.

Finally, there is a real apologetic need for a satisfying account of why God exists. Like the historical philosophers surveyed here, I think the UPSR is true, and can be used as a key premise in sound arguments for a being whose explanation is in itself. So do such contemporary luminaries as Stephen T. Davis and William Lane Craig, among others.[29] We therefore owe our interlocutors more than a superficial analysis of what it means for something to have its explanation in itself, and *much more* than a stock phrase of Scholastic provenance. For my part, I think such analyses, once freed from the shackles of divine simplicity,

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will yield new concepts of the explanatory ultimate that have profound apologetic significance: if for something to have its explanation in itself it must have a certain internal structure, we can eliminate things which do not have that structure as candidates for playing the requisite explanatory role in our cosmological reasoning, be they the universe, fundamental particles, or rivalling concepts of God. At the very least, without having something substantive to say here, the 'What's God's explanation?' retort to a UPSR-based cosmological argument will have all the force its straw man counterpart is commonly presumed to have.[30]

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## Notes

1. Penelhum's essay, couched in the terms of the day, preceded the explosion of literature on modal metaphysics that occurred in the subsequent decade. Even so, Penelhum's central contention – that the requisite explanatory stopping point in PSR-based cosmological arguments must be *self-explanatory* – has not been fully appreciated. Attempts to sidestep the issue, such as Plantinga's (1964), by contending that it is nonsensical or absurd to ask why God exists on the grounds that God, as a necessary being, lacks causal conditions of His existence are unconvincing. There are types of explanations other than causal ones that answer 'Why?' questions.
2. For a defence of the view that this is a version of the PSR, see Smith (2014), ch. 7. A note on 'reason' and 'explanation' in the context of the PSR. I assume, as I think Anselm et al. did, that 'reason' and

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'explanation' are not merely epistemic notions; that is, *a* can be the reason for *b*, or *a* can be the explanation of *b*, even if there were no humans to see that. Explanation in this context isn't *just* something we do to make things intelligible.

3. Anselm would not have understood luminosity in the modern physics sense of total amount of energy emitted by an object per some unit of time.
4. And, furthermore, to have that conjunction conserved in being at every time at which the thing is. Beings whose necessity is caused by another have form but not matter, and are still such that their existence is distinct from their essence.
5. The scare quotes because, again, to say 'there is existence *simpliciter*', apart from some non-existentially committing reading of 'there is', is just to say existence *simpliciter* exists. But existence *simpliciter* is not something that *has* existence.
6. Since it is provable from the necessity of identity, $(\forall x)\Box(x = x)$, and a substitution instance of the substitutivity of identity, $(\forall x)(\forall y)(x = y) \supset [\Box(x = x) \supset \Box(y = y)]$, that $(\forall x)(\forall y)((x = y) \supset \Box(x = y))$. See Kripke (1971). This is just how identity works, unless Aquinas is prepared to embrace contingent, relative, or some other kind of identity weaker than Leibnizian/Kripkean identity.
7. I understand that this is where the doctrines of analogical predication and non-univocity of being come in to play: true, when it is said that God's essence is identical to His existence, we don't mean 'essence' and 'existence' in the same sense in which these are understood in created things; there is some analogical sense of these terms that apply to God, who is not one being among other beings, but is *sui generis*. But it seems to me that for any statement of the form '*x* is analogous to *y*' to be meaningful, *x* and *y* must have something in common, or be similar in some respect, *R*. Otherwise, one would be forced to say that *x* and *y* can be analogous yet have absolutely nothing in common, which is absurd. Further, it is but a short step from these doctrines to a kind of divine ineffability that destroys meaningful discourse about God entirely, including discourse concerning God's very existence, as employed in the Five Ways.
8. According to a constituent ontology like Aquinas', a thing's 'internal causes,' i.e. form and matter, are considered parts of that thing.
9. Leftow sees the problem as reason to not interpret Aquinas as committed to the PSR. I'm inclined to see it as a problem for Aquinas' view: simplicity, in particular.
10. Since Aquinas thought the proposition 'God exists' is analytic because God's essence is identical to His existence (see SCG I.10.4, I.11.5), one might think that for Aquinas God's existence is self-explanatory in the same way that the truth of analytic propositions is sometimes said to be self-explanatory. For example, the truth of the proposition 'all bachelors are unmarred men' depends entirely on the meaning of the terms contained within the proposition itself. Once you understand the meaning of the terms, you can just 'see' that the proposition is true, and so is, in that sense, self-explanatory. But interpreting Aquinas here as offering an account of how God's *existence* is self-explanatory confuses something's being self-evident with its being self-explanatory, and these are by no means the coextensive, much less synonymous. Aquinas is clearly describing how *the proposition* 'God exists' is self-evident, not how *God's being* is self-explanatory. Even if Aquinas were correct that the predicate 'exists' is either identical to or included in the definition of the subject 'God' on account of God's existence being identical to His essence, that says nothing about how *God's existence itself* gets explained. As Leftow (2003, 284) puts it,

> For Thomas, God's having His nature makes His having His existence self-evident (*per se notum*) to those who grasp God's nature, i.e. 'see' the divine essence. But it is not self-evident to these lucky souls *why* God exists. What is self-evident is just *that* He exists. For Thomas, 'God exists by nature' is just a way to say that God's nature = God's existence.

11. It doesn't help that a major school of thought among Descartes scholars is that he has no clear and definite views of the metaphysics of causation. See discussion in Clatterbaugh (1999), 42ff.
12. Neither Christofidou nor McBrayer elucidate what it means for something to be its own formal cause. The idea of something's being its own formal cause is sometimes illustrated by example with geometric objects. It is the essence of a triangle that it be a closed plane figure with three sides. Its essence (having only three sides which meet), or formal cause, just is its existence (a triangle). Leibniz objects, saying the example shows only that if a triangle exists, it has a certain essence, not that its essence entails its existence. See quotations in Griffin (2013), 40. Perhaps the thought is that we still might wonder, after learning what a triangle is, whether triangles have a *fundamentum in re*. But as I explain below, the deeper problem

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is that even if a thing's essence entails its existence, that does not constitute a sufficient explanation of the thing. So I don't see how such examples could help here, *contra* Hynes (2010).

13. Richard Lee (2006) argues that the assimilation of the divine essence with a unique power to exist is present in prior Scholastic accounts of aseity as well, such as Aquinas's, Scotus's, and Suárez's. The idea is that things exist by virtue of some power (*virtus essendi*) to resist corruption, a power that arises not from its matter, but from its form or essence.
14. Abbreviations: I = *Ethics* Part I, def. = definition, a = axiom, p = proposition, s = scholium, dem. = demonstration. Quotations from Spinoza (E).
15. Ip25s: 'In a word, in the same sense that God is said to be self-caused he must also be said to be the cause of all things.'
16. Wolfson (1934), 127, 128. As should be evident by what has been said so far, Wolfson errs in conflating necessary existence with existence *per se*.
17. We can detect in Leibniz's view here early shades of what is now termed 'axiarchism', the view that 'God' exists because of an ethical necessity. Suffice it to say here that an analysis of axiarchism is beyond the scope of this article, not least because axiarchism is usually associated with a non-traditional conception of God.
18. Compare Kit Fine's (1995) oft-cited example of metaphysical grounding: there is a mutual modal entailment between the set {Socrates} and the man, Socrates. The existence of one entails the existence of the other. But it is the man Socrates that *explains why* {Socrates} exists. So while there is modal symmetry, there is explanatory asymmetry. If we want to say something similar about God's essence and His existence, we'd say God's essence grounds God's existence. But then God's existence would be ontologically posterior to, and asymmetrically dependent on, God's essence.
19. The label is Edward Feser's. Feser finds the objection on the lips of Bertrand Russell, Daniel Dennett, Robin Le Poidevin, Michael Martin, Simon Blackburn, and Graham Priest, among others, not to mention the many introductory texts and courses that repeat it. Feser was also my lead on the Clarke (1889) reference, cited henceforth.
20. See Wuellner (1956), 17–21, 105–106 and Hocutt (1974). One example is Samuel Clarke who, while denying that God has a cause, predicates his cosmological argument on the observation that 'Whatever exists has a cause, a reason, a ground of its existence, a foundation on which its existence relies, a ground or reason why it does exist rather than not exist' (D, 8). This ambiguity was responsible for much confusion and debate in the eighteenth century onward. See Gurr (1959) and Schopenhauer (F).
21. Be it restricted to just contingent beings, contingent truths or facts, dependent beings, or even possibly caused or possibly explicable beings. For a sampling of these arguments, see Gale & Pruss (1999), Rasmussen (2010), and Weaver (2016).
22. We might also have looked at the accounts of Bonaventure, Richard of St Victor, Scotus, Suárez, Christian Wolff, and Samuel Clarke, all of whom appeal to a similarly worded UPSR.
23. For a compelling presentation of this point, see Schopenhauer (F).
24. The argument, developed by van Inwagen (1983), in brief: all contingent truths have an explanation. The conjunction of all contingent truths has an explanation. That explanation can't itself be a contingent truth, because then it would be its own explanation, which is impossible. So the explanation must be a necessary truth. But whatever is entailed by a necessary truth is itself necessary. So, if all contingent truths have an explanation, there are no contingent truths. For responses, see Vallicella (1997), Schnieder & Steinberg (2015), and Levey (2016).
25. For more on the argument that there is nothing special about there being nothing that would cry out for explanation, unlike the existence of something, see Taylor (1992), 100–103. Brenner (2016) denies that there is a correct interpretation of Leibniz's question. Maybe he's right, but my point here is that we are justified in interpreting the scope as including God.
26. Hence an infinite regress of essences internal to what is fundamental ($x$ exists in virtue of its essence, $x$'s essence exists in virtue of the essence's essence, *ad infinitum*), as imagined by a referee, is no less vicious, since it exhibits precisely the sort of explanatory failure the 'turtles all the way down' scenario does. If the reason any one member needs explaining is also found in the prior member, explanation is infinitely deferred, leaving no explanation of the series as a whole. Cf. Pruss (2006), 211–212; Pruss (2018), 28ff. Note the series here is ordered *per se*, not *per accidens*, nor is it merely logically iterative like the truth regress.
27. On explanation in this context being irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive, see Nozick (1981), 116ff. and Glazier (2020).

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28. It seems evident to one referee that 'a supremely perfect being's existence cannot coherently have the type of explanation in view, whereas that isn't so for a less than perfect thing'. I am sympathetic to this thought. As I note below, it is to be expected that an explanation of God would be weirder than explanations of other things, but it can't differ so radically that it fails to be, well, explanatory.
29. The PSR Davis (1999) uses is 'Everything that exists has a reason for its existence' and the one Craig (2007) uses is 'Anything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.'
30. Thanks to Derk Pereboom, Scott MacDonald, Andrew Brenner, Johnny Waldrop, Scott Hill, Elizabeth McIntosh and the anonymous referees for comments on all or portions of this article.

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