Two criticisms of the principle of sufficient reason

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A cosmological argument for the existence of God purports to infer the existence of a necessary being from the existence of one or more contingent existents. The justification for the inference is that one cannot consistently hold that x is contingent and that y does not exist, where y is a necessary being. The justification for this claim is generally thought to reside in some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (hereafter PSR). A typical expression of this principle is as follows: whatever exists must have an explanation of its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other being. So, it is argued, since contingent existents do not have the explanation of their existence in themselves (else they would exist necessarily), they must have the explanation of their existence in the causal efficacy of some other being. Further, it is argued that this other being whose causal efficacy provides the explanation of the existence of a contingent existent cannot itself be contingent. For if the putative explanation of the existence of a contingent existent x is a contingent existent y, the state of affairs or fact that y-causes-x is itself contingent. So, y is not an explanation of the existence of x but at best a part of that which, according to the PSR, needs an explanation. By this reasoning it is thought that no contingent y can explain the existence of x. Thus if x requires an explanation (according to the PSR), the only y that can provide this is a necessary being.

Clearly, some version of the PSR is required both to justify the claim that contingent beings need explanations for their existence and to support the claim that only one sort of explanation is possible. Yet the PSR is thought to be vulnerable to
many criticisms. Some of these are captious or frivolous. I should like to focus on two objections which are weighty and widely held to be decisive. Either objection would destroy any cosmological argument by refuting the claim that a contingent existent must have a cause and therefore that this cause can only be a necessary being. I believe that both objections rest on a misunderstanding about contingency and about the PSR.

It is well to stress at the beginning the ambiguous status held by the PSR in the minds both of some critics and some defenders. Occasionally, the PSR is understood as the conclusion of a cosmological argument rather than that which, along with one or more other premises, justifies an inference to a certain conclusion. Such an approach merits the frequently made complaint of circular reasoning. For if the PSR is a principle it cannot be a conclusion. Its use is required to prove it. On the other hand, its defenders are not reduced simply to affirming the principle without argument. The appropriate argumentative strategy, however, is that of a reductio proof, demonstrating that one cannot consistently deny the PSR and hold to the truth of other propositions. This strategy is of course limited in that one may always choose to give up the truth of these other propositions rather than accept the truth of the PSR. Further, the PSR could not conceivably function on its own as a cosmological argument, for whereas it claims that there is an explanation for the existence of everything, it does not, without additional premises, entail that there is one and the same explanation for everything. Such a proof would presumably consist in a propter quid demonstration based on a definition of necessary being.

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The first objection is well stated by James F. Ross in his splendid book *Philosophical Theology*. The gist of Ross’s objection is that there is an insuperable destructive dilemma for one who holds that every contingent existent or state of affairs depends directly on a necessary being for its existence. Let n stand for the necessary being and c for any contingent existent. Now the state of affairs consisting of n’s causing c to exist is itself either