

Gilson and Maritain on the Principle of Sufficient Reason

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Our first principles are said to be so fundamental to our thinking as to be “quasi innate.” That is, while not being innate, after our first encounter with being, we understand in an implicit way the difference between to be and not to be. The principle of noncontradiction, more usually referred to as the principle of contradiction, is said to underline our first judgment whatever it is. If we assert “x is y” we are excluding at that moment the thought “x is not y,” and so in some form, the first principles of contradiction, identity and excluded middle are always part of our thinking.

Before Leibniz, reference to first principles would ordinarily include along with the principle of contradiction, what later would be called axioms of geometry: “things equal to the same thing are equal to each other” or “the whole is greater than its part.” These principles are indemonstrable in their primacy, and are assented to as soon as the meaning of their terms is understood. These principles are the basis of our thinking and to attempt to prove them would involve the fallacy of “begging the question,” that is, using in your premises what you are trying to establish in your conclusion. Approaching it from another angle, Aristotle showed that anyone who would try to counter the principle of contradiction with a serious argument would commit the absurdity of having to use what he is attacking as soon as he began to make a statement of his belief.

So too Leibniz in his *Principles of Nature and Grace Founded on Reason* arguing to establish the monad as the fundamental unit of reality asserts:

Up till now we have spoken as *physicists* merely; now we must rise to *metaphysics*, making use of the great principle, commonly but little employed, which holds that *nothing takes place without sufficient reason*, that is to say nothing happens without its being possible for one who has enough knowledge of things to give a reason sufficient to determine why it is thus and not otherwise.¹

¹ Gottfried Leibniz, *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*, trans. Mary Morris (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1961), pp. 25-26.

It is interesting that in the following sentence Leibniz asks that basic question said to be at the foundation of philosophic speculation: "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

The Principles of Nature is dated 1714. Before he died two years later, Leibniz also wrote the classic *Monadology*. Here he affirmed his "reasonings are based on two great principles: the principle of contradiction, by virtue of which we judge to be false that which involves a contradiction, and true that which is opposed or contradicting to the false; and the *principle of sufficient reason*, by virtue of which we consider that no fact can be real or existing and no proposition can be true unless there is a sufficient reason why it should be thus and not otherwise, even though in most cases these reasons cannot be known to us."²

John Edwin Gurr, S.J., in his most valuable study *The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Some Scholastic Systems, 1750-1900*,³ shows how this principle of Leibniz was taken up by the great German systematizer of philosophic teaching, Christian Wolff (1679-1754), and through Wolff became part of the German textbooks of the eighteenth century. Gurr's is a most thorough and excellent study of how the Catholic textbook writers of the late eighteenth and then nineteenth centuries took up the principle of sufficient reason in their ontological textbooks, and for the most part, but not universally, made it part of what might be considered the Catholic philosophic tradition before the gradual re-discovery of St. Thomas in the mid-19th century. By that time it came to be a toss up as to whether or not Leibniz's principle would be included in the scholastic manuals that were being written for seminary students *ad mentum sanctae Aquinatis*. Here it should be said that Gurr's study is something of an exposé in which he has indicted many authors for believing they were authentic Thomists while really they were the victims of an essentialist tradition going back beyond Wolff and Leibniz to Suarez and Avicenna. Gilson's *Being and Some Philosophers* is quoted as part of this indictment of early modern Catholic textbook authors.

In the pre-Vatican II era and well into the 1960's when one was assigned to teach the "natural theology" class, while the students might be using as a course textbook something like Fr. Henri Renard's *Philosophy of God*, as teachers we made use of the notable work by the great Dominican theologian Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange. His two-volume work *God: His Existence and*

² Ibid., p. 9.

³ John Edwin Gurr, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Some Scholastic Systems, 1750-1900* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1959).

*Nature*⁴ was a background work that helped a teacher give depth to his preparation. After some 240 pages he did get around to give what he called an “exposé of proofs for the existence of God” but he invested hundreds of pages of refuting objections from Idealists and Agnostics, explaining the Vatican I dictum that God’s existence was knowable by natural reason, and reflecting on the metaphysical basis of St. Thomas’s famous *viae*. Amongst the foundational items he examined was the principle of sufficient reason.

The principle of sufficient reason may be expressed by the following formula: “Everything which is, has a sufficient reason for existing” or “Every being has a sufficient reason;” consequently, “everything is intelligible.”⁵

Garrigou-Lagrange asserts, of course, that this principle is self-evident; it cannot be demonstrated, but is open to an indirect demonstration by way of a *reductio ad absurdum* were it to be denied. Since Garrigou-Lagrange is not the object of this paper I shall pass over his complicated argument simply noting that he serves as an example of a leading Thomist of the pre-Vatican II era who used Leibniz’s principle and gave support to it. He recognized there are various difficulties contemporary critics of the demonstration of God’s existence might bring up but since the time of Hume and Kant the issue of causality was an especially sensitive one. My point is how much a part of mainstream Thomism sufficient reason was mid-20th century.

I was actually searching for another book when I stumbled on a Ph.D. dissertation⁶ published in 1941 by Sister Rose Emmanuella Brennan, of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, based here in the Bay Area. I never got to know Sr. Brennan personally, but I had made use of her translation, the first into English as far as I know, of St. Thomas’s *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas*. Her dissertation done at The Catholic University of America under the direction (I infer from the acknowledgment of her introduction) of the Reverend Ignatius Smith, long time Dean of the School of Philosophy. The dissertation was a study of the intellectual virtues according to the philosophy of St. Thomas, and as she comes to the first of the speculative virtues, understanding or the habit of first principles she includes a long quotation from John Henry Cardinal Newman’s *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*.⁷

⁴ Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *God: His Existence and Nature*, trans. Dom Bede Rose, O.S.B. (St. Louis, Missouri: Herder, 1939), vol. I.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.181.

⁶ Rose Emmanuella Brennan, *The Intellectual Virtues According to the Philosophy of St. Thomas* (Ph.D. diss, The Catholic University of America, 1941).

⁷ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1870), pp.167-69.

Now Newman had no special Thomistic background as far as I know, but he had a brilliant mind that could be very original. Thus he affirms a number of principles that he recognizes as not demonstrable yet serve as a basis for our thinking. Without quoting his pages, he begins with the recognition of our own existence, the existence of other things; that we have a sense of good and evil, a knowledge of our consciousness and a memory for past events; that we are mortal and are part of history, and that the future is affected by the past. It is an interesting list and it would include most of what we would judge to be our “common sense” observations and amongst these is the judgment that there is an order in nature or as he puts it “a universe carried on by laws.” I mention this because after Brennan reviews the ordinary lineup of first principles: i.e., identity, noncontradiction, excluded middle, sufficient reason and causality, she adds: “The principle of uniformity,” which is introduced as a refinement of the principle of causality as applied to the experimental sciences. Thus our knowledge that the future will be like the past is offered as a basic insight in her exposition of St. Thomas’s habit of first principles.

Whereas I had suspected that Garrigou-Lagrange was an influence on Maritain, the convert, when he was learning his Thomism, as it were, in the period of World War I and the early 1920s, this was confirmed by his reference to Garrigou-Lagrange in *A Preface to Metaphysics*.⁸ In the fifth lecture of this work whose subtitle is “Seven Lectures on Being,” Maritain begins with a consideration of the principle of identity; it is in this context he quotes Garrigou-Lagrange’s formulation from *Le Sens Common et la Philosophie de l’Être*: “Every being is of a determinate nature which constitutes what it is.”⁹ Maritain, however, having quoted him goes on to differ with his friend on the issue of grasping the transcendentals such as being (*ens*) and thing (*res*). Maritain sees it as the same insight viewed under two different aspects: being as existing, and being as something essential, stressing the perfection “a particular essential determination.”¹⁰

Also favorably quoted is my former teacher at Toronto, Gerald B. Phelan. His version of the principle of identity is “being is being.” Maritain takes this version from his friend, Phelan, and anticipating the objections of the positivists and the analytic philosophers that it is a tautology, Maritain shows

⁸ Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics: Seven Lectures on Being* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1945).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

how other famous phrases such as “What is done is done” and Pilate’s “What I have written I have written” are loaded with meaning and thus are not a simple repetition of the subject in the predicate.

In contrast to the attitude of Fr. John Edwin Gurr in his study of sufficient reason’s use amongst the German and scholastic philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Maritain accepts it simply as among the first principles. Gurr regards the principle as a product of the essentialism and rationalism stemming from Suarez, Leibniz and Wolff into the textbooks of the later scholastic philosophers. However Maritain has no trouble affirming it and giving it his Thomistic blessing.

Instead Maritain approaches sufficient reason in the context of the transcendental *Truth*. As he says the intellect faces reality, as it were, and confronts its essential aim intuiting that “being must be the sufficient good of intellect.” The follow through on this insight leads ultimately to God, as the ground or ultimate reason for all being. Maritain is concerned to stress the universal character of sufficient reason; its scope embraces all being, created and uncreated. He says:

This principle has a far more general scope and significance than the principle of causality. For the principle of sufficient reason is exemplified in cases in which the efficient cause plays no part. For instance, man’s rationality is the ground, the sufficient reason of his *risibilitas* and *docilitas*. Similarly the essence of the triangle is the ground of its properties, and there is no difference of being, no real distinction the properties of a triangle and its essence. Again God’s essence is the ground of his existence, He exists *a se*, He is Himself the sufficient reason of His *esse*, the ground of His existence, since His essence is precisely to exist.¹¹

Thus we find Maritain being perfectly comfortable with the principle of sufficient reason: “Everything which is, insofar as it is, has a sufficient reason for being.” God explains himself and as far as creatures are concerned they have their sufficient reason from another. This would be the place to go on to a discussion of the principle of causality should he choose but Maritain instead proceeds next to a discussion of the principle of finality.

Gilson wrote a great deal on topics in metaphysics and epistemology, but I failed to find passages that would parallel the treatment Maritain gave to first principles in *A Preface to Metaphysics*. Where Gilson discusses the beginning of human knowledge he closely follows St. Thomas and speaks of the grasp of being, and then there will be a reference to the principle of noncontradiction. In his *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, speaking of the beginning of our knowledge, he says:

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

This much is certain, then, from the beginning of this new inquiry: the apprehension of being by the intellect consists of directly seeing the concept of being in some sensible datum. For the moment, let us try to clarify the nature of what that is the intellect apprehends when it conceives the first principle. To begin with, we must distinguish two operations of the intellect. The first, which is simple, is the means by which the intellect conceives the essence of things; the other, which is complex, affirms or denies these essences of one another and is called judgment. In each of these two orders there is a first principle: being, in the order of apprehension of essences, the principle of contradiction in the order of judgments. Moreover, these two orders are arranged hierarchically, for the principle of contradiction presupposes the understanding of being. [Here Gilson quotes in Latin a statement of the principle of contradiction from Aquinas's *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Book IV, lect. 6. #605] "Hoc principium, impossibile est esse et non esse simul, dependet ex intellectu entis" Thus, the principle which is first in the order of simple apprehension is also absolutely first, since it is presupposed by the principle of contradiction itself. In short, the first principle, in the fullest sense, is being.¹²

Hence we notice that in a discussion of first principles Gilson stays close to the text of St. Thomas. Aquinas, of course, while benefiting from the writings of Aristotle in the principle of contradiction could not anticipate that Leibniz would go beyond the Stagirite and affirm a principle of sufficient reason. Where does that leave Gilson?

It happens that in 1970 when he was a visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley, I came several times to chat with him in his appointed office hour in which, incidentally he was usually sitting alone. I had earlier presented a paper on "The Principles of Sufficient Reason and the Existence of a Necessary Being," and that provided the occasion for our talking about sufficient reason.

First, Gilson did not reject the principle. How could one reject "Being is Intelligible"? But because of its Leibnizian context he was reluctant to affirm it as a first principle after the principle of contradiction, of course. The background of this is developed in *Being and Some Philosophers*, chap. IV.¹³

To my claim that the principle could be divorced from its essentialist setting in Leibniz and Wolff and given an existential interpretation, he did not reply; he did not counter that this was impossible; it simply seemed that he was reluctant to agree. At the time I was unaware that he had taken a position in an 1952 article in the *Revue Thomiste*, where he wrote: in "Les

¹² *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark Wauk (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p. 197.

¹³ Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952).

Principes et Les Causes”

Here arises a reversal due to the vicissitudes of history. A philosopher whom St. Thomas could not have foreseen, Leibniz, later affirmed that there are two first principles, one for necessary truths—the principle of contradiction—and the other for contingent truths—the principle of sufficient reason. For Thomists, what is one to do with this second first principle? Some suggest formulating it as follows: “Nothing exists without sufficient reason.” In that case it means this: for something to exist in the world rather than not exist, and for it to exist in a given manner rather than in some other manner, there must be a cause that determines whether it exists or does not exist, and exists in this way rather than otherwise. Two reflections now suggest themselves. First of all, this principle cannot be held to be an absolutely first principle. Indeed if nothing determines that something exist rather than not exist, or be as it is rather than otherwise, then it is possible for that thing both to be and not to be, or to be at the same time that which it is and something else.

Since this would be contradictory, one can say that the formula of the principle of sufficient reason leads back to the principle of contradiction. Secondly, and for the same reason, this principle is valid for necessary truths not less than for contingent truths. Thus it is not necessary that man exist, but if he does exist it is held to be necessary the he be endowed with reason and, consequently, since God is infinitely wise everything has been ordered by His thought, and wherever there is order there is reason. This means that there are sufficient reasons for things necessary just as there are for things contingent. Hence the conclusion: “The principle of sufficient reason is true, and it is valid not only for contingent truths but also for necessary truths, so that it must be held to be their principle, but not their first principle.”¹⁴

This last quotation within the Gilson selection is from a text written by Cajeton Sanseverino,¹⁵ a Jesuit from Naples whose seminary textbooks were in use in 1879 when Pope Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris* served as the Magna Carta for the revival of Thomism. Sanseverino was not a trained Thomist; his early writings were eclectic, reflecting a Cartesian bias but in the latter half of the nineteenth century, he, like other Catholic philosophy professors were making the attempt to write their philosophy according to the mind of St. Thomas Aquinas in the name of Christian philosophy.

This brief study on a small point in the philosophies of Gilson and Maritain is intended as a window to examine their differences. This examination serves to underline two varieties of Thomism: the open innovative character of Maritain and the more traditional approach, even historical approach of

¹⁴ Étienne Gilson, “Les Principes et les causes,” *Revue Thomiste* 52: 1, pp. 47-48.

¹⁵ Cajeton Sanseverino, *Philosophiae Christianae cum antiqua et Nova Comparatae*, (Naples, 1900, 10th edition) t. II, pp. 4-12.

Gilson. It seems to me not to be too much to say of Gilson's metaphysics that if there is not a textual basis in the writings of St. Thomas, he won't affirm it. But there it is, while well aware of sufficient reason, Gilson ignores it and makes no mention of it in his later editions of *Le Thomisme*, nor in his textbook *Elements of Christian Philosophy*¹⁶ written especially for Catholic schools at the urging of his friend and disciple Anton C. Pegis (who had left teaching temporarily in the 1950's to become an editor of the Catholic textbook division of Doubleday & Company). Thus while not rejecting the principle of sufficient reason Gilson tends to shy away from it as Gurr also does in his study of the principle. Given its origin in Leibniz and its central role in the writings of the rationalists and essentialists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, there is a hesitation to believe it can be given an existentialist interpretation.

However, speaking for myself as a teacher attempting to make Aquinas's third way, the argument from "possible being" to a necessary being, understandable to undergraduates, I was grateful that the principle of sufficient reason was available for use.

¹⁶ Étienne Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1960).