

Notes on Comments for APA Humean Principle of Sufficient Reason

In this paper, Builes considers how to answer challenge that arises for powerful versions of the principle of sufficient reason like the following:

PSR Every fact has an explanation

PSR* (Gupta) Every substantive fact has an autonomous ground

The challenge asks: if PSR is true, what explains the principle of sufficient reason itself?

Builes argues that PSR advocates can answer this challenge by advocating giving a merely Humean explanation for the principle of sufficient reason (i.e., an explanation which conjoins all the instances of this principle with a 'that's all' clause).

Main question/challenge: Builes considers an objection to his proposal for defending the PSR which maintains that giving a merely Humean explanation for PSR leaves the PSR looking like an implausible coincidence. I want to elaborate this objection by raising questions about two things Builes says in response to it.

1. First, Builes notes that PSR has been argued to be a necessary truth (if true). And he claims that this fact makes its truth seem 'less of a coincidence than it would otherwise be', because it means that (if true) PSR could not easily have failed to obtain.

Specifically, he argues as follows, "it is natural to think that if something is a coincidence, then it could have easily been false. However, if the PSR is metaphysically necessary, then there are no nearby possible worlds in which it is false."

But how much power does this observation that a certain regularity couldn't have easily failed to obtain have to show that regularity is not a coincidence?

Builes acknowledges that there can be coincidences in pure mathematics. And he would presumably allow that coincidence reduction reasoning regarding can play a legitimate role in guiding mathematical research (c.f. how Fields-medal winning work on the magic moonshine conjecture was inspired by expectations that there should be some deeper explanation for a striking match between patterns of facts two seemingly unrelated areas of mathematics). Builes might also allow that analogous coincidence recognition and avoidance intuitions have a legitimate role to play in choosing philosophical theories.

But (I take it) he still maintains that norms of coincidence avoidance apply with less force in these mathematical and philosophical cases (where it is already clear that relevant regularities couldn't have easily failed to obtain).

However, an alternative perspective would be that considering cases like coincidence avoidance reasoning in mathematics shows that demands for explanation of modal stability (this principle

could not have easily failed) are the wrong tools for analyzing our intuitive notions of coincidence (because they leave out some important cases) -- not that norms of coincidence avoidance apply with less force in these cases.

For example, if we want to keep the idea that coincidences are regularities that cry out for explanation but receive none, perhaps Philip Kitcher's ideas of explanation as unification might provide a better starting place for an analysis of coincidence that applies coincidence reduction reasoning in a way that generalizes to cases involving necessary truths.

Or one might argue that dialectically, intuitions about coincidence recognition and the distinction between coincidence banishing explanations and non-coincidence banishing explanations can be taken at face value/primitives on their own terms. Further conceptual analysis is always welcome. But people wielding these informal coincidence avoidance intuitions in particular cases (in the sciences, math, philosophy etc) have no particular obligation to provide them.

[1.5 Also, do traditional arguments that PSR is a necessary truth if true, fit with taking it to only have a Humean explanation? (After all, some truths are contingent truths so if the only explanation we have is a Humean one it's unclear why we should expect the PSR to be a necessary truth.)]

2. Second, Bules notes that we could just admit that the truth of PSR is a coincidence -- after all we know that coincidences sometimes happen.

I agree that coincidences happen, and sometimes it's rational to accept that an apparently striking pattern or match between two things is just a coincidence. However, there seems to be a fairly strong general ceterus paribus norm against posting extra coincidences when this can be avoided. And I'm not aware of any strong motivations for accepting PSR that could counterbalance this weakness when choosing between PSR and 'there is only a humean explanation of PSR' vs. rejecting PSR [(and thus avoiding any appearance of coincidence)].

Accordingly, one might worry that even if Builes' Humean-explanation strategy lets PSR escape direct refutation (via absence of any plausible unifying explanation for PSR itself), it leaves us with an apparently strong (and not counterbalanced) reason to disfavor PSR. So learning to love coincidence grants only a pyrrhic victory.

Background and Invitations to Say More

3. It might help heighten the impact of this paper for a general audience (and clarify what the PSR theorist could say counterbalances general ceterus paribus norms of coincidence in this case), to say a bit more about the appeal of PSR.

-For example, what is the most attractive thing about PSR (in your opinion)?

-And what should the PSR advocate say about explanations for actual outcomes in cases involving non-deterministic physical laws and objective physical probability? For example, what

would explain why a particle decays (or not) in cases where it had objective physical probability $\frac{1}{2}$ of decaying in a given interval of time?

4. Finally I'd like to invite Bules to say a bit more about how he sees the overall structure of exploratory dependence/partial grounding in this area working. In particular, do we get some kind of grounding/explanation loop or regress from the following

* PSR is partially grounded/explained by each of its instances, i.e. by each fact F_i and the explanation for F_i ,

*PSR is among these facts F_i that are instances.

Would it be a problem if we did?