

Sufficient Reason in Aquinas and Lonergan

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In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 22, 6, Aquinas had noted that nothing can be the cause of itself. Otherwise, it would be in once causality and effect. We refer here to a real distinction which exists between a cause and an effect (a real distinction which precludes any kind of thinking which would want to suppose that any given thing can possibly cause itself). If anything were to cause itself, it would have to exist before it could come into being as an effect and a contradiction exists when we suppose that something really and truly exists before it is then brought into being as a truly existing real thing. However, if a given thing exists not because it has brought itself into being but because of causes, factors, or reasons which explain why a given thing exists (why it has been brought into being from a prior condition of non-being or non-existence), we refer to the presence of sufficient reasons which must exist if we are to understand the existence, presence, or being of any given thing. For further information here, see W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 20-23, on what he has to say about the principle of sufficient reason as, implicitly, this can be derived from the metaphysical analysis of Aquinas: *ex nihilo nihil fit secundum naturam* [in reality, from nothing comes nothing] and hence, conversely, from being comes being. Cf. Aquinas, *Sententia super Metaphysicam*, 12, 2, 2437. Nothing (absence of being) cannot be used as a reason or as an explanation for the being of any given thing. From nothing, as is, we cannot get being. Being emerges from non-being if we can refer to the presence of some kind of cause or event. However, if something, in fact, exists as a cause or as a principle, it possesses being. It has reality. It can be said intelligibly to exist and, to the degree thus that it exists, it is not lacking in some kind of meaning or intelligibility which properly belongs to it (a meaning which says or which explains what it is apart from the being of other things or why it exists in the manner which specifically belongs to it). Some kind of reason explains why a real distinction exists between the being or the existence of a given being and the condition or state of its possible non-being or its possible non-existence, and this reason is deemed to be sufficient because, as understood and known, it satisfactorily explains why a given thing exists and why we cannot speak about its non-being or its non-existence. Where in some cases (in most cases) a cause differs from its effect (within the world of our ordinary experience, we cannot speak about things which cause themselves), in other cases, a sufficient reason does not need to differ from a thing or an event which it is attempting to explain since some things (i.e., infinitely existing beings) exist apart from any action or influence that could come from an external cause. The meaning or the intelligibility of some things includes the fact of their being or the fact of their existence. If we want to speak about the presence of sufficient reason within a context which is understood through a form of mediation which works with metaphysical language, we can say that “sufficient reason’ is that in virtue of which the thing exists.” Cf. Ronald Shady, Notes on the principle of sufficient reason, quoting Scott Sullivan, “The Thomistic Principle of Sufficient Reason,” November 7, 2012. A sufficient reason could be equated with the existence of a given thing or a given event which exists before something else is brought into being although, in *understanding and knowing* about the existence of a prior thing or a prior event, in the *understanding and knowing* which we could have, we have presences of reason which could be equated with what we understand when we want to speak about a meaning for sufficient reason.

Turning, however, to a general definition which Clarke proposes in the context of his metaphysical understanding and articulation, it is said by him that “every being has the *sufficient reason* for its existence (i.e., the adequate ground or basis in existence for its intelligibility) either in itself or in another.” Similarly, Neil Ormerod notes in “Intellectual Conversion in Book 7 of the *Confessions*,” *Pacifica* 25 (February 2012): 18: “everything that exists has its reasons for existence” [reasons which

exist as specifications of intellectual being even if they have yet to be known and discovered by us through any our inquiries which we make and the reception of any direct acts of understanding]. In the understanding of Augustine, we find, as with Aquinas, that reality, substance, and existence all “correlate with reason.” Sufficient reason, its presence, is constitutive of reality in all of its aspects. In the absence of sufficient reason or, appositely, in the absence of any meaning or in the absence of any intelligibility that is constitutive of sufficient reason, what we would have in this type of situation would be an absence of reality, an absence of existence, or an absence of substance. What we would have would refer to a paradoxical presence of evil since evil, as a privation, as a lack of being, is to be directly contrasted with presences of sufficient reason which we could have in a given situation and to which we must refer if we want to talk about why something exists or what something is with respect to the kind of nature which it has and which we would want to understand and know.

In our desire for understanding and for rational apprehensions of meaning which can remove any doubts that we could have about the reality or the correctness of any meaning that we have understood, in this desire and for this reason, Lonergan speaks about the principle of sufficient reason as if it were a kind of self-transcending presupposition: a presupposition or a goal which exists as an orientating notion or as an orientating intending which exists within the order of our human cognition (moving us through our various acts of cognition in a manner which takes us from one act to another act until we can engage in activities which can satisfy requirements which are stipulated by the law of sufficient reason). Cf. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 18. With respect to sufficient reason which exists as a species of first principle, Lonergan speaks about the “operation of a single law of utmost generality.” Cf. *Insight*, p. 346. This law norms or it regulates our acts of cognition as a species of fundamental law or first principle (cited by Lonergan as “the law of the intellect”). Cf. Lonergan, “Analysis of Faith,” as cited by Ronald Shady, Notes on the principle of sufficient reason, p. 1, November 12, 2012.

On the one hand thus, within the order of being or the order of reality, we can speak about sufficient reason in terms which say that, given the operation of this cause, we must have the presence of this effect (sufficient reason being the link which exists between a given species of being and other species of being) or, conversely, from what exists as some kind of effect (we refer to something which exists but which is not able to account for the being of its existence), there must be some kind of cause which necessarily exists as a predisposing pre-condition (a cause which we have yet to understand and know). Within this context, sufficient reason refers to a species of causality that exists between two absolutes since here a cause is other than an effect and an effect is other than its cause. Real distinctions are to be adverted to.

However, when we turn to human acts of cognition, within the order of our conscious human cognition, we say that sufficient reason refers to an order of dependence which differs from the order of causality or order of production that we find within physical, organic nature and how one given event or thing relates to another given event or thing. Cf. Lonergan, *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964*, pp. 139-140. Or, in other words, physical or organic causality is quite other than the kind of causality which we find within presences of intellectual emanation. Sufficient reason, within our human cognition, refers to an experience of adequacy or aptness or, more strongly, an experience of compulsion or exigence which subjectively exists within us within our acts of understanding whenever we realize that, in the face of persuasive evidence or in the face of ever mounting increments of new pieces of evidence, we cannot now refuse to make a judgment which rationally and knowingly acknowledges the truth or the reality of a proffered affirmation (the being or the reality of a truth which is known by us to exist as a truth): a truth which exists for us either as a knowledge of verified meaning or as a falsehood which we know to exist for what it is as a falsehood because of what we have also understood and grasped through acts of judgment which exist as reflective acts of understanding. Cf.

Triune God: Systematics, p. 773, n. 17. In the experience which we have of a presence of sufficiency in known evidence, we experience a presence of adequacy or a presence of sufficiency in our conclusions (a sufficiency which refers to our reasoning activities and the awareness which we have of conditions and a fulfillment of these same conditions as these are given to us in grounding acts of sense which are joined to grounded acts of understanding as these are known when we refer to a conformity which should always exist between our various acts of thinking and understanding and the basic laws or the first principles of our human reason). We recall how the different kinds of distinction which we make are all partially dependent on how faithfully we adhere to the basic principles of our logical reasoning (which exist also as laws or principles of being) whenever we think about what is given to us when we advert to the principles of identity, contradiction, and excluded middle (not excluding also the principle of sufficient reason). Within the practice or praxis of sufficient reason as this exists within our cognitive intentionality (in meeting the demands of our rational appetite in a manner which accounts for the dynamism of our rational intentionality), an operative potency presents itself to us as a habit or condition of mind or intellect which refers to a distinct pattern of acts and operations that is always normative in our understanding whenever here we refer to our acts of judgment and the requirements which must be met if our acts of judgment are to exist in a manner which is proper to acts of understanding which are to be equated with reflective acts of understanding. Within our understanding, within the rationality which is present within our acts of reflective understanding, sufficient reason is to be equated with a species of intellectual emanation (one act coming from another act in a relation of dependence) and, by means of this intellectual emanation and the presence of sufficient reason which thus links one act with another, we also know about how sufficient reason exists within the external world of physical organic nature when we look at how a given cause is related to a given effect and how also, from an effect, we can speak about a proper cause that we have yet to understand and know.