

## THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

### Talking points:

1. Suppose we entertain the view that things simply exist without any reason for their doing so, that things just happen for no reason, and propositions are simply true and no reason can be given for their truth. To hold this view for anything and everything that exists or happens would be stultifying. Indeed much, if not all, of our progress as inquirers (be it in science, mathematics, history, geography, philosophy and so on) assumes that we can identify reasons for things existing and/or happening. It is seeking out reasons for things existing and/or happening that ultimately drives human inquiry. Furthermore, at a practical level, you certainly do not want a doctor who, opposed to the principle of sufficient reason, tells you that there are no reasons for your symptoms and that there is nothing that you can do about them! “It’s just one of those things” is not a very satisfying diagnosis and it is not conducive to finding remedies. Rather, you want reasons for your symptoms so that, in identifying the causes behind them, you can be given possible remedies. Thus, it seems, the principle of sufficient reason is assumed in all inquiry.
2. Can we find reasons for everything? We might answer that it is gravity that causes an apple to fall downward, but what causes gravity? And if we were able to answer this question, then we might ask what causes that which causes gravity, and then ask what causes that which causes that which causes gravity, and so on. Theoretically, if we persist in our questioning, then we will end up with either an infinite series of questions and answers or we will, at some point, come to a halt by answering “It just is that way and no further explanation can be given.” Consider the following dialogue: Person A: “How did the universe come to be?” Person B: “It was created by God.” Person A: “Then how did God come to be?” Person B: “God just is.” Or, another line of reasoning might go: Person A: “The universe arose from a Big Bang.” Person B: “But what caused the Big Bang?” Person A: “Nothing, it just happened.” (Or, another reason is given for which we pose another “How did that happen?” question.) To avoid an infinite series of questions and answers, we may have to settle for an “It just is” explanation. If this is the case, then the principle of sufficient reason is not a universal principle; there are some events for which no explanation can be given.

### Questions for discussion:

1. Are some “events,” such as the existence of the universe or the existence of God, inexplicable? In other words, is the principle of sufficient reason inapplicable for some “events”? If so, can you think of “events” that will inevitably lie beyond explanation because, ultimately, they happen for no reason? Or do you think everything happens for a reason? If so, then does this imply that there is an infinite series of questions and answers, a series that we can never, in practice, complete?
2. Would the principle of sufficient reason be satisfied if we simply declare that everything and anything that happens, happens because it is the will of God? In other words, by declaring that God is the *reason* for anything and everything, we have satisfied this principle. Justify your answer.

