

Why I Am Not a Strict Monist

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ABSTRACT

In *The Parmenidean Ascent*, Michael Della Rocca presents a fascinating case for what he calls *Strict Monism*, which is the thesis that there are no distinctions. In this paper I shall explain why I do not believe in Strict Monism. I shall first explain Strict Monism in detail, and then I shall explain why it is false. If a thesis is false, whatever arguments have been provided for it must fail in one way or another, and so I shall also explain why and how the arguments provided for Strict Monism fail. Finally, I shall comment on the significance of my conclusions and I shall point out, among other things, that we do not have any reason, at least at the moment, to think that any version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason entails Strict Monism.

1. In his impressive book, *The Parmenidean Ascent*, Michael Della Rocca presents a fascinating case for what he calls *Strict Monism*. Strict Monism says:

(SM): There are no distinctions (Della Rocca 2020, 1).¹

I do not believe in Strict Monism, and Della Rocca will not be surprised about this. Indeed, he expects his readership not to embrace Strict Monism. But he wants his readers to take his view seriously and not merely dismiss it or disagree with it—instead, he urges his readers, if they disagree with him, to show him where he goes wrong (xxi–xxii, 81). His view is so interestingly argued and defended that it cannot but be taken seriously, and it is quite a challenge, for those who do not believe in Strict Monism, to show where Della Rocca goes wrong. This is what I shall attempt to do in this paper.

Della Rocca's path to Strict Monism, what he calls the *Parmenidean Ascent*, can be summarised as follows: the Principle of Sufficient Reason entails that distinctions are unintelligible, and the Principle of Sufficient Reason requires that everything is intelligible, therefore, given the Principle of Sufficient Reason, there are no distinctions. The case for Strict Monism depends, thus, on the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or at least on a restricted version of it, as we shall see.

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My rejection of Strict Monism does not depend on any attitude about the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Indeed, it seems to me that the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or any version of it, has not yet been shown to entail Strict Monism, and this is one of the things I aim to argue for in this paper.

The structure of the paper is as follows: in the second section I shall explain Strict Monism in more detail, and in the third section I shall explain why Strict Monism is false. Now, if a thesis is false, whatever arguments have been provided for it must fail in one way or another, and so in the fourth section I shall explain why and how the arguments provided for Strict Monism fail. Finally, in the fifth section I shall comment on the significance of my conclusions in the fourth section and I shall point out, among other things, that we do not have any reason, at least at the moment, to think that any version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason entails Strict Monism.

2. Let us compare Strict Monism with two more common versions of Monism, *Existence Monism* and *Priority Monism*:

(EM): There is only one entity.

(PM): There is only one fundamental entity.

Often Existence Monism and Priority Monism are formulated as theses relating to the number of concrete entities, i.e., Existence Monism is taken to be the thesis that there is only one concrete entity, and Priority Monism is taken to be the thesis that there is only one fundamental concrete entity (see Schaffer 2018). There is good reason for this restriction, since it is with respect to concrete objects that most of the debate between monists and pluralists has taken place. But given that Strict Monism is a thesis with maximal generality, and therefore does not admit even the distinction between the concrete and the abstract, it is appropriate, for the purposes of comparison of Strict Monism with other monistic theses, to lift the restriction to concrete objects and consider maximally general versions of Existence Monism and Priority Monism.

But how does Strict Monism differ from Existence Monism? If there are no distinctions, then there should be no distinct entities, and therefore there should be only one entity, one would be tempted to argue. But Della Rocca rejects this inference. For him, if there were only one entity, there would still be distinctions, if only conceptual distinctions between numbers (Della Rocca 2025, 370). Does this mean, then, that Strict Monism is a version of Nihilism, the doctrine that there is nothing at all? No, for Della Rocca thinks that non-being is not purely positive, and therefore it is inherently relational—but if there are relations, there are distinctions, and therefore non-being is incompatible with Strict Monism (81–82). For Della Rocca, then, there is just being, purely undifferentiated being. In other words, there is being, but no beings.

Now, I have doubts about Della Rocca's idea that absolute or pure non-being is relational. For relations link *relata*, and those *relata* must be entities, i.e. beings. Relations and relationality are inherently ontic. Absolute non-being, pure nothingness, cannot be related to anything—if it were, it would be a *relatum*, and therefore it would be an entity. What is not cannot be related, and therefore absolute non-being cannot be a *relatum*. Another way of seeing this might be this one: what is not cannot have any properties at all, but what is related has relational properties, therefore absolute or pure non-being cannot be a *relatum*.

Perhaps what Della Rocca has in mind is that non-being is conceptually relational in the sense that the concept of non-being includes the denial of any characteristics or features, including relationality. Perhaps. But this would make the concept of non-being, not non-being itself, relational. And if there were just non-being, nothingness, there would not then even be the concept of non-being. Thus, I do not see why non-being, nothingness itself, is inherently relational, and consequently I do not see why Strict Monism does not entail a disjunction:

either there is undifferentiated being or there isn't anything at all. But I shall not insist on this and I shall accept as a consequence of Strict Monism that there is being, just being, pure and undifferentiated being.

Thus understood, placing Strict Monism alongside Existence Monism and Priority Monism makes apparent a difference between them: while Existence Monism and Priority Monism are numerical claims, asserting, respectively, the existence of only *one* entity and only *one* fundamental entity, Strict Monism does not assert the existence of any entity, not even one, but is committed simply to undifferentiated being. That is, while Existence Monism and Priority Monism feature a count noun in their formulation, the formulation of the commitments of Strict Monism requires only a mass noun (78). That's why Della Rocca suggests at one point that Strict Monism might be called 'being-ism' rather than 'monism' (240).

Since monism is generally thought to be a family of theories characterised by the number of entities of a certain kind they recognise, namely one, there is a sense in which Strict Monism is not a kind of monism, for its truth implies that there is not even one entity of any kind. Thus, when Della Rocca says that Strict Monism is perhaps stronger than Existence Monism and certainly stronger than Priority Monism (21), he must be understood as meaning that Strict Monism is more radical than the two counterpart theories, not that it logically entails them without being entailed by them. Now, by denying any and all distinctions, Strict Monism is incompatible with any kind of pluralism, since if there are no distinctions, there is no plurality of any kind, and so Della Rocca is right that in this sense Strict Monism is a kind of monism.

But if there is only undifferentiated being, how can there be thought, meaning, intentionality? All such phenomena seem to presuppose the distinction between subject and object, and therefore they seem incompatible with Strict Monism. But Della Rocca argues, in a similar way to the way in which he argues that there are no beings but only undifferentiated being, that there are no actions but only undifferentiated action (110), there are no distinct states of knowledge but only undifferentiated knowledge (142), there are no distinct meanings but only undifferentiated meaning (170), and there are no distinct truths but only undifferentiated truth (180). But, of course, (undifferentiated) being, action, knowledge, meaning and truth cannot be different from each other, since in that case there would be distinctions. Strict Monism entails that being is action, which is knowledge, which is meaning, which is truth (181).

How does Della Rocca argue for Strict Monism? I shall go into the details of his argument that there are no distinctions in being in Section 4. But all his arguments follow the same pattern, the most important part of which is the assumption of some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. For instance, when arguing for the fact that there is no differentiated substance or being, he assumes that substance or being has an explanation; when arguing that there is no differentiated action, he assumes that action has an explanation; and the same is true when he argues that there is no differentiated knowledge and meaning. Della Rocca's justification for assuming the relevant versions of the Principle of Sufficient Reason is that, in the philosophy of substance, action, knowledge, and meaning, there is a widespread acceptance of an explanatory demand concerning their subject matters. In every case, after assuming a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason concerning the subject matter in question, Della Rocca goes on to argue that the respective explanatory demand cannot be satisfied.² But this strategy, however, has an obvious limit: it cannot be applied in those areas where there is no widespread agreement to the explanatory demand encapsulated by a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. And this is why in the case of truth Della Rocca's argument is indirect: he argues that, since there is no differentiated meaning, there is no differentiated truth (178–81). Indeed, as Della Rocca notes, there is a substantial number of philosophers of truth, variously known as deflationists, who do not acknowledge any explanatory pressure with respect to their subject matter (176).

There is another limitation to Della Rocca's dialectical strategy, and this becomes clear when the phenomenon of differentiation is indubitable, and therefore it must be accepted. For in

this case the explanatory demand must be accepted only if it does not lead to rejecting the phenomenon of differentiation itself, since being indubitable, differentiation cannot be denied or rejected in this case. In general, when the phenomenon to be explained is indubitable, we are faced with two options: either we take the phenomenon as explainable or, if an explanation is proven to be impossible, we accept it as unexplainable, basic, primitive. The option of rejecting the phenomenon because of being unexplainable is available only when there is more reason to accept the explanatory demand than there is to accept the phenomenon (in the next section we shall see an example of indubitable distinctions or differentiation).

Accepting the conclusion of Della Rocca's argument, namely accepting Strict Monism, requires engaging in the Parmenidean ascent, the movement of the mind by which it rejects and abandons all distinctions. The Parmenidean ascent consists in capturing reality as it is, or 'seeing the world aright', namely without distinctions. This seeing is, of course, not distinct from what it sees. Reality, or being, is knowledge according to Strict Monism. Thus, the Parmenidean ascent is the adoption of a kind of mysticism. Now, the mysticism in Della Rocca's Parmenidean ascent is not one of experience but one produced by reasoning: reason reasons itself out of itself and into a realm that must be arational, since the realm of reason is always a realm of *reasons*, and what those reasons are reasons for, and therefore it is a realm of distinctions. As Russell said, referring to the mysticism originating in Parmenides, this kind of mysticism might be called 'logical mysticism' (Russell 1959, 8).

If Strict Monism is true, and there is only being but no beings, and being is knowledge but not knowledge of any particular truth or truths, then "I" should undertake the Parmenidean ascent and become one with the world and see the world aright, as it is, without distinctions, through a seeing that is itself the world (there are quotation marks around the word 'I' because, if Strict Monism is true, there are no *Is*). Now, if there is such a mystical apprehension, all I can say is that I am unable to take the big leap, abandon distinctions altogether, become one with the world and see the world aright, without distinctions. I cannot do it—I don't even know how to do it. That is, partly, why I am not a strict monist. But this fact is only of biographical interest, if of any interest at all. There are more interesting reasons why I am not a strict monist, and this is because there are reasons not to be one. To these reasons I now turn.

3. Della Rocca is aware that there is a kind of argumentative incoherence in Strict Monism, or at least in the way he argues for Strict Monism (219–25). He considers four ways in which his arguments are self-undermining. First, his arguments are self-undermining because they appeal to a relational or differential notion of metaphysical explanation, but those arguments establish, in Della Rocca's view, Strict Monism, a thesis that is equivalent to the thesis that there are no relations and distinctions. Second, his arguments lead to the conclusion that Strict Monism cannot be stated, since stating Strict Monism requires putting it into some kind of propositional structure, but there is no structure if Strict Monism is true. Third, his arguments form part of a distinctively philosophical inquiry into relations and substance, but if there is only undifferentiated being there is nothing distinctively philosophical. Fourth, though according to Strict Monism there are no distinctions, and no negation, and no non-being, such notions are used when establishing and articulating Strict Monism (219–20).³

How does Della Rocca react to this self-undermining? For him, it is a feature, not a bug (221). Indeed, Della Rocca finds joy in the self-undermining character of his arguments, as the title of his ninth chapter, "Paradox and the Joy of Self-Undermining," indicates.⁴ He proposes a Wittgensteinian strategy to deal with this self-undermining:

I grant that the arguments involved in various forms of the Parmenidean Ascent are, by my own lights, incoherent or—to use a Wittgensteinian term—nonsense. Nonetheless, these

arguments can be regarded as a ladder that we climb up and then throw away when we realize that they are nonsense. And in climbing, in—as I might say—ascending, we—as Wittgenstein might say—see the world aright in the sense that we are, finally, free of the illusion of distinctions, especially the distinctions that we appeal to in carrying out certain forms of metaphysical thinking. (220)

I shall come back to the Wittgensteinian strategy later. For the moment, I want to point out that Della Rocca sees the self-undermining as threatening the arguments for Strict Monism rather than Strict Monism itself.⁵ This is clear from the quote above, where he says that it is the arguments that are to be thrown away, not Strict Monism—on the contrary, Strict Monism is preserved, since it permits us to see the world aright.⁶

But there are reasons to think that Strict Monism itself is self-undermining. And, if so, there are reasons to reject Strict Monism itself, not just the arguments for it.

First, Strict Monism is self-refuting in the sense that, if true, it cannot be rationally believed or accepted. For if Strict Monism is true, there are no distinctions and therefore no distinct concepts. But rationally believing a thesis requires understanding it, and Strict Monism is an articulation of the distinct concepts of existence, negation, and distinction. Without these distinct concepts being articulated in the precise way in which Strict Monism does, there is no thesis of Strict Monism, and therefore Strict Monism is nothing to be understood. But if Strict Monism cannot be understood if it is true, then it cannot be rationally believed or accepted if it is true.⁷

That a thesis cannot be rationally believed if it is true does not show that it is false. But it shows that the thesis cannot be rationally maintained or accepted. Thus, the only rational attitude towards Strict Monism is nonacceptance, i.e., rejection.

Now, that Strict Monism cannot be rationally believed if it is true has consequences for the arguments whose alleged conclusion is Strict Monism. For the premises of a good argument must provide good reasons for believing its conclusion. But Strict Monism, if true, cannot be rationally believed, and therefore there cannot be any good reasons for believing it. Thus, there must be a fault in Della Rocca's arguments for Strict Monism.

Note that this is not the same as the Wittgensteinian strategy that Della Rocca counsels. That strategy takes the arguments to establish their conclusion, Strict Monism. Once the conclusion is established and believed, the arguments are discarded. What I am saying here is that given that Strict Monism cannot be rationally believed if true, no argument can really establish it, since no premises can be good reasons for believing it. In other words, the arguments for Strict Monism do not allow us to climb up anywhere from which we can and should throw them away. If this is right, there must be a fault in those arguments—and identifying it is the aim of the next section.

There are other considerations that show that Strict Monism is false. For, given that there appear to be distinctions, the thesis that there are no distinctions entails that what appear to be distinctions are really illusions of distinctions. But the existence of illusions, even of one illusion, presupposes a distinction between reality and illusion. So given that there appear to be distinctions, there is at least one real distinction, that between reality and illusion. But then Strict Monism is false.

Note that the point is not that the claim that distinctions are illusory is part of Strict Monism, and therefore, since illusions presuppose distinctions, Strict Monism is false if true. That point mischaracterizes Strict Monism. Strict Monism does not say that anything is illusory—it only says that there are no distinctions.⁸ The point is that there appear to be distinctions (such appearances are manifest to my consciousness: right now, as I write this, it appears to me as if there are different sounds, colours, and shapes) and if Strict Monism is true, such appearances

can only be illusions, and if they are illusions, Strict Monism is false. Thus, we have grounds to consider Strict Monism false, and therefore we have grounds to reject Strict Monism.

These grounds show the falsity of Strict Monism by inferring the reality of distinctions from the appearance of distinctions. But there are grounds that show the falsity of Strict Monism even more directly, without having to infer the reality of distinctions. For the reality of distinctions and distinct beings is a certainty that it would be irrational to deny or reject. Thus, it is a datum of consciousness that I exist and that I am distinct from my thoughts; it is also a datum of consciousness that I think distinct thoughts; it is also a datum of consciousness that I understand distinct concepts, and it is a datum of consciousness that there are distinct elements in my phenomenal consciousness. But it is irrational to deny and reject, even to doubt, the reality of what is presented to my consciousness in these cases. In other words, it is certain that these data are true and represent realities. But these data contradict Strict Monism. Therefore, we have grounds to be certain that Strict Monism is false.

But aren't the things I am calling data of consciousness *intuitions*? After all, sometimes Descartes calls his apprehension of his own existence an intuition. And, in any case, in so far as I directly apprehend the things I listed in the previous paragraph, calling them intuitions is not inappropriate. Now, Della Rocca puts forward a strong case against the method of intuitions. Doesn't his case against it undermine my appeal to intuitions in arguing against Strict Monism? No. According to Della Rocca, intuitions are arbitrary because they are fallible and therefore "there is no reason that we should attune our theories to fallible intuitions rather than adopt some other, extra-intuitive starting point" (271). But this does not apply to the data that I am distinct from my thoughts, that I think distinct thoughts, that I understand distinct concepts, and that there are distinct elements in my phenomenal consciousness. These are not fallible presentations: their truth is manifest and therefore I cannot rationally doubt them. (In other words, I am rationally obliged to accept *those* intuitions. But then, since I am certain that they contradict Strict Monism, I am rationally obliged to reject Strict Monism).⁹

So there are two distinct but related types of grounds to conclude that Strict Monism is false. Now, there cannot be any good reasons to believe a false thesis. Thus, we are entitled to infer that there must be a fault in Della Rocca's arguments for Strict Monism.

Again, this is not the same as the Wittgensteinian strategy that Della Rocca counsels. That strategy takes the arguments to establish their conclusion, Strict Monism. Once the conclusion is established and believed, the arguments are discarded. What I am saying here is that, given that there are conclusive reasons for the falsity of Strict Monism, no argument can really establish Strict Monism. In other words, the arguments for Strict Monism do not allow us to climb up anywhere from which we can and should throw them away. If this is right, there must be a fault in those arguments—and identifying it is the aim of the next section.

4. In different chapters of the book Della Rocca gives arguments to undermine, respectively, differentiated conceptions of substance, action, knowledge, meaning, and truth. The main argument is the one on substance or being (Della Rocca uses the terms 'substance' and 'being' interchangeably [24]). In any case, this is where I think I can identify a fault, and since identifying a fault in this particular argument is sufficient to block the inference to Strict Monism, this is the argument I shall concentrate upon. Nevertheless, since the other arguments are structurally analogous to the argument against differentiated being, the same sort of fault is likely to be present there too.

What is Della Rocca's argument against differentiated substance? His argument has two parts, an inductive part and an *a priori* part. The inductive part consists in showing that the most prominent theories of substance have failed to explain what makes a substance a substance, and inferring from there that probably all theories of substance are a failure (24–58). All I have to say about this part of the argument is that, by itself, it doesn't have the force to establish Strict Monism.

The *a priori* part consists of an argument designed to show that all theories of substance, at least all theories of substance conceived under the guidance of a restricted version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, must fail. Della Rocca's argument does not actually use or require the full version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason—all it needs is a restricted version of it. The version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason Della Rocca has in mind is restricted to relations and relational facts: all relations and relational facts are explainable (61, 74).¹⁰ Then, according to Della Rocca, the substance-making relation R linking S to T (where T is whatever relatum a substance S must be related to by R, whatever relation R might be) should be explained by a relation of partial grounding between S and R, R'. But R' is a relation . . .

So we ask: on what is R' grounded? Well, R' is a relation (of partial grounding) between S and R and, as such, it depends not only on S and on R but also on a relation of partial grounding between S and R' itself. (R' also depends on a relation of partial grounding between R' and R). Call the relation of partial grounding between R' and S, R''—i.e. R double prime. Notice that in order to metaphysically explain R and thus in order to metaphysically explain R', it now turns out that we must metaphysically explain R'', and so on *ad infinitum*. Or to put the point epistemologically, our understanding of what makes S a (differentiated) substance is not complete until we have a grasp of the substance-making relation, R. But we cannot be said to grasp R until we grasp the relation, R', of partial grounding on which R depends. And we cannot be said to grasp R' until we grasp a further relation, R'', of partial grounding, and so on *ad infinitum*.

As my presentation of it already indicates, this regress is vicious. The initial relation R *depends* on a further relation, R', which in turn *depends* on a further relation, R''. *Before* one can explain R, one must *first* explain R'. But *before* one can explain R', one must *first* explain R'', and so on *ad infinitum*. One's explanation of R can thus never be completed and, since the explanatory goal—essential to the theory of substance—demands that we account for the substance-making relation, our explanatory goal cannot be reached, and we must, as Hume would say, inevitably be dissatisfied. (64; italics in the original)

The conclusion Della Rocca derives from this is that (differentiated) substance cannot be and cannot be thought. But does this conclusion follow from the argument?

I shall concede that, given Della Rocca's assumptions, it follows that there is an infinite regress of relations, and that any relation at any point in the regress depends on the relation at the immediately subsequent point in the regress. But this does not imply, in itself, that such a regress is metaphysically impossible. The mere fact that a series is infinite does not make it metaphysically vicious.

Sometimes an infinite series is alleged to be vicious because it offends against ontological economy. But it is not clear that this is so in the present case and, in fact, there is nothing in Della Rocca's text suggesting that this is what he has in mind. And even if each member of the infinite series depends on the next one, as I have conceded to Della Rocca, this does not in itself make the regress metaphysically vicious (cf. Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002, 108–109).

In previous work Della Rocca argued that an infinite series of relations ordered in terms of grounding would violate the idea that relations are grounded. He says of the view according to which a relation is grounded in other relations which are grounded in other relations and so on *ad infinitum* that it leads to saying that “ultimately there is no *thing* or things in virtue of which x and y stand in this relation” (Della Rocca 2012, 148, italics in the original). On the contrary: to say that a certain relation is grounded in other relations which are grounded in other relations

and so on *ad infinitum* is to say that there are infinitely many things, i.e. relations, on which that relation is grounded.

Now, Della Rocca is clear that the reason why R depends on R' is that R' is part of the nature or essence of R (62–63); similarly, the reason why R' depends on R'' must be that R'' is part of the nature or essence of R', and so on. Here the nature or essence of a relation R must be understood to consist of those things, properties, or whatever, that make R the relation it is—indeed, in so far as he grants the distinction between constitutive and consequential essence, Della Rocca claims that R' is part of the constitutive essence of R (66). But this does not make any difference. The fact that each relation in an infinite series is part of the nature or essence of the previous relation does not make that series metaphysically impossible, and therefore it does not make the first member of that series metaphysically impossible. Indeed, that fact does not mean that the identity or being of any member of the series cannot be grounded. For in such a series every member has its identity or being immediately grounded in the next member and ultimately grounded in all of the subsequent members.

Thus, there seems to be no metaphysical reason that makes the regress vicious. Now, in *The Parmenidean Ascent* Della Rocca identifies the viciousness in an epistemological or explanatory aspect of the regress. For him, the fact that every relation in the regress depends on the following one means that we cannot grasp or understand any relation in the regress unless we have *first* understood the next one. The idea is that understanding any individual relation in the regress presupposes having *first* understood another one—put in terms of explanation, in order to explain any relation in the regress, one must *first* have explained the following relation. Such understanding and such explanation are never complete, since they always presuppose the understanding or explanation of something else. Thus, even if one had the intellectual capacity to grasp an infinite number of relations, one would not be able to grasp the relations in this regress, since one would not have been able to have understood any of them. According to Della Rocca, then, the explanatory goal can never be completed: we can never understand or grasp what the substance-making relation is. The ultimate conclusion Della Rocca draws from this is that there are no substances, no beings, but only being or substance as such, that is, undifferentiated being or substance.

But the conclusion does not follow. For the infinite regress of relations does not entail that in order to grasp or understand the substance-making relation we need to grasp or understand infinitely many individual relations. From the fact that there is an infinite regress of relations it follows at most that to understand the notion of differentiated substance we need to grasp or understand the 'mechanics' of the regress, i.e., to grasp or understand what types of relations are involved in the regress, the grounding and dependence relations obtaining between them, and that there are infinitely many relations ordered in such a way that each one depends in the relevant sense on the next one. But this is perfectly possible to do—indeed we grasp these things in grasping the infinite regress of relations. For when we understand that the postulation of a substance-making relation leads to an infinite regress, we understand that it is grounded in a relation linking it to its terms, we understand that grounding entails dependence, and we understand that every relation grounding another one in the series is also grounded in another relation in the series.

But if R' is part of the nature of R, how can I understand R if I do not understand R'? And how can I understand R' if I do not understand R'', given that it is part of the nature of R'? Doesn't this mean that, given the regress, I cannot understand R, the substance-making relation? And if I cannot understand the substance-making relation, doesn't it follow that I cannot understand what makes a substance a substance? No, it doesn't. First, even if to understand R I need to understand R', and to understand R' I need to understand R'', and so on, it doesn't follow that I cannot understand R, the substance-making relation. For R', R'', and all the subsequent

relations, have a very thin nature: their nature is exhausted by their role, namely to relate a previous relation to its relata. So I do understand the nature of R' , R'' , and every subsequent relation. That knowledge is part of what it is to understand the mechanics of the regress. Secondly, and most importantly, even if I cannot understand the nature of R' , R'' , and every subsequent relation, and even if this means that I cannot understand the nature of R , the substance-making relation, it doesn't follow that I cannot understand what makes a substance a substance. For not every part of the nature of the substance-making relation needs to be relevant to its substance-making character. In particular, relation R' and its nature need not be relevant to the substance-making character of R . In effect, what makes R the substance-making relation has nothing to do with the fact that relation R' links R to its relata, since, given the generality of the regress, every relation is such that it is partially grounded in a relation linking it to its relata, but clearly not every relation is a substance-making relation.

Of course, that we can grasp the mechanics of the regress does not mean that we can understand the substance-making relation. But Della Rocca's reason for concluding that we cannot grasp the substance-making relation is the existence of the regress of relations, for he thinks that, given the regress, we cannot understand the substance-making relation unless we understand or grasp the infinitely many individual relations in the regress. But, as I have just argued, this does not follow, even granting the existence of the regress: what follows is at most that we need to understand the 'mechanics' or structure of the regress and, as I said, this is perfectly possible to do. Thus, Della Rocca's argument does not establish the unintelligibility of the substance-making relation.

I have, then, identified the problem in Della Rocca's regress argument, namely that the conclusion does not follow, and I have explained why it does not follow. My take implies that the Bradleyian infinite regress of relations with which Della Rocca is concerned is not explanatorily vicious. The view that Bradleyian infinite regresses of relations are not explanatorily vicious is not new: there have been others advocating or expressing sympathy with such views (see, e.g., Orilia [2006]). Now, I am not claiming that no version of Bradley's regress is explanatorily vicious. The explanatory viciousness of a regress depends partly on what the *explanandum* is. Della Rocca's *explanandum* is not relatedness in general, but one particular relation, namely the substance-making relation. But couldn't Della Rocca argue for Strict Monism by targeting the Principle of Sufficient Reason and his Bradleyian regress to a different *explanandum*? Some philosophers seem to think that, when the *explanandum* is relatedness in general, that is, the general fact that there are things that are related to each other, the regress is vicious: "[Bradley's regress] shows that if we attempt to explain what it takes for one thing to bear a relation to another in terms of a further relation then we will never achieve explanatory closure" (MacBride 2011, 172–73). Thus, it might be thought that Della Rocca could use his Bradleyian regress and a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason to conclude that there is no relatedness in general and, therefore, there are no relations of distinction. But the mere demand that relatedness in general must have an explanation does not entail, even in the presence of a Bradleyian regress, that we will never achieve explanatory closure. For neither the regress itself nor the Principle of Sufficient Reason entail that how relations relate is to be explained in terms of further relations. All the regress entails is that whenever a relation relates, that relating is grounded by other relations relating that relation to other entities, but this does not entail anything about how relations relate. And all the Principle of Sufficient Reason entails is that relatedness in general must have an explanation, but it does not entail what type of explanation it is. Thus, we might understand how relations relate, and we might understand that when one relation relates two things that relation is related to each thing by different relations, without this meaning that we explain *how* relations relate things ("what it takes for one thing to bear a relation to another," in MacBride's words) *in terms of* a further relation.

Della Rocca also argues that the problem of accounting for the substance-making relation leads to a vicious circle. Let us examine this argument. This is what he says:

Thus, as we saw, R is grounded, in part at least, in S and R'. But R' is grounded in (*inter alia*) its relata, and so R' is grounded, in part, in S and R. Putting these two grounding claims together and given the transitivity of grounding, we reach the result that R is grounded in part in R itself. This is because R is grounded, in part, in R' which is grounded in part in R. Thus, R is grounded, in part, in R, and so we have a circle. This is a problem. (67, italics in the original)

Obviously, this argument cannot be disarmed in the same way as the infinite regress argument. Nevertheless, there is no vicious circle here, and this is simply because there is no circle here.¹¹ Let us say that there is a circle when some item is related to itself by some relation, and there is a vicious circle when a certain item is supposed to be related to itself by an irreflexive relation. Let us assume that grounding is an irreflexive relation. Does it follow that R is grounded in itself in this case?

No, it doesn't. To see this it is important to be clear that for there to be a circle there must be a circling chain of items related by the same relation. That is, a circling chain of items related by different relations is not thereby a circle. Consider the following example: belief P is justified by belief Q and belief Q is caused by belief P. In so far as these are the only relations linking P and Q, there is no circle in this situation, for in that case neither belief is justified by itself nor is it caused by itself. Similarly, in the situation represented in Della Rocca's argument there is no single relation linking R and R* in both directions.¹² For consider that situation: R links S and T, and R* links R and S. The relation expressed by ' _ links _ to something else ' does not lead from R to R through R*, since R does not link R* to anything else. Thus, no reason has been given to claim that R is its own relatum. Nor has any reason been given to claim that R* is its own relatum. For the relation expressed by ' _ links _ to something else ' does not lead from R* to R* through R, since R does not link R* to anything else. Thus, we are not entitled to conclude that there is a circle, let alone a vicious one, in this situation.

Does it make any difference if we take the fact that R links S and T, rather than R itself, to be what is grounded in R*, and the fact that R* links R and S, rather than R* itself, to be what is grounded in R? It doesn't. For in this case R appears as ground but not as grounded, and R* appears as ground but not as grounded. Similarly, the two facts R's linking S and T, and R*'s linking R and S, appear as grounded but not as ground. That is, what we have in this situation is that R* is a ground of a fact involving R and R is a ground of a fact involving R*. But this does not entail that either of these relations or either of these facts is a ground of itself. So, no circle of grounding, and therefore no vicious circle of grounding, results from considering facts about R and R* to be what is grounded.

Now, it may be thought that even if R is not related to itself via R* and R* is not related to itself via R, this does not really address Della Rocca's point. For, it might be claimed, although the way in which R grounds R* (as a relatum grounds the relation of which it is a relatum) is not the way in which R* grounds R (as a relation grounds the relation it links to its relatum), these are both ways of being grounded, and therefore there is a general relation of grounding that R bears to R* and that R* bears to R. Since, it is assumed, this general relation of grounding is transitive, R is grounded in itself, and so is R*; hence, the circle. There is indeed some textual evidence suggesting that this might be Della Rocca's point, since he says, for instance, that

because standing in a relation of grounding to one or more of its relata is built into the nature of any relation, it follows that our relation R depends not just on its relata, but also depends on the relation of grounding that it stands in to one or more of its relata. (63)

The phrase *the relation of grounding that it stands in to one or more of its relata* may, but it need not, be understood to refer to a general relation of grounding which admits of different specific types of grounding (it may also be understood to refer to the particular relation of grounding, R^* , that links R to its relata).

But there is no reason to think that the general relation of grounding is irreflexive. Consider again the case in which P justifies Q and Q causes P . And suppose they are both types of grounding. It follows, given the transitivity of grounding, that P is grounded in itself (and so is Q too). But there is no reason to think that this kind of grounding is irreflexive. Similarly, there is no reason to think that the grounding that obtains because R grounds R^* in one way and R^* grounds R in another way is irreflexive.

Therefore, I conclude, it has not been shown that accounting for the substance-making relation leads to a vicious circle.

5. In the previous section I identified the faults in Della Rocca's arguments for Strict Monism. This is important for three different reasons. First, in Section 3 I gave arguments showing that Strict Monism is false, and I argued that if those arguments are correct, there must be some fault in Della Rocca's argument for Strict Monism. Thus, identifying the faults in the arguments for Strict Monism corroborates the conclusion that Strict Monism is false.

Second, it shows that Della Rocca's Wittgensteinian response to the self-undermining character of the arguments for Strict Monism is unnecessary. The arguments for Strict Monism are not self-undermining. A self-undermining argument is one that establishes a conclusion that contradicts some of the premises of the argument. But the arguments for Strict Monism fail to establish their conclusion. If my assessment is correct, they are not self-undermining arguments, but inconclusive ones. Thus, this is where I think the case for Strict Monism goes wrong.

Third, no version of Principle of Sufficient Reason, whether full or restricted, has been shown to entail Strict Monism. Thus, for all we know, the Principle of Sufficient Reason is compatible with a world of pluralities and distinctions.¹³

NOTES

1. From now on, when giving a reference to Della Rocca's *The Parmenidean Ascent*, I shall omit author and year and give only the page reference.
2. Although Della Rocca does not offer a direct argument for the Principle of Sufficient Reason in his book, he offers one in [Della Rocca \(2023\)](#).
3. To be exact, when describing the fourth way of self-undermining, Della Rocca refers only to Parmenides, but he clearly implies that this applies to his own version of the Parmenidean ascent.
4. Della Rocca claims that after the Parmenidean Ascent and its overcoming of metaphysical thinking we are free to joke and play (223). But jokes and play presuppose distinctions. Jokes are not effective unless they are understood, and such understanding requires distinctions. And, if not rules, at least certain patterns of activity are essential to play—but both rules and patterns of activity require distinctions.
5. Note that Della Rocca's point about the impossibility of stating Strict Monism might have been presented as a reason for taking Strict Monism itself as self-undermining. But he emphasises the fact that his arguments for Strict Monism imply that Strict Monism cannot be stated, and he takes the arguments, rather than the thesis itself, to be self-undermining.
6. Della Rocca claims, and has to claim, that the seeing involved in seeing the world aright is not relational and it is not distinct from what is seen (224). But can Della Rocca make sense and appeal to the notion of seeing the world *aright*? On the one hand, this notion seems to presuppose a distinction between correct and incorrect seeings. On the other hand, given

that the seeing and the seen are the same, and there is nothing else, what sense is there in calling such a seeing aright? For more issues with Della Rocca's appeal to the notion of seeing the world aright, see Moore (2025, 348–49).

7. Couldn't Strict Monism be saved from this kind of self-refutation by expressing it through the thesis that *Being is*, which does not seem to articulate distinct concepts? I don't think so. For although the thesis that *Being is* is a consequence of Strict Monism, it is not even equivalent to it, since the thesis that *Being is* is compatible with there being distinctions.
8. Cf. Moore: "[Della Rocca] does not believe that anything is an illusion: there is only being" (Moore 2025, 344). I believe Moore is right, because I take him to be speaking about Strict Monism rather than, strictly, about what Della Rocca believes. But the assertion might not be true if taken literally, as an assertion about what Della Rocca believes: "In this way, my overall arguments—in relying on notions that I come to see, by virtue of those very arguments, as *illusory*—are self-undermining" (219, my italics).
9. Della Rocca is aware that philosophers like Descartes have taken intuitions to be infallible and therefore that his criticisms of intuitions may not apply to them (80, n.31). However, there is no attempt in Della Rocca's book to undermine the validity of appeals to infallible, rationally certain data like the ones I have appealed to. Della Rocca does undermine the validity of appeals to common sense and commonsensical beliefs—I agree with Della Rocca's criticisms of appeals to common sense and commonsensical beliefs but, needless to say, the infallible, rationally certain data I have appealed to are not commonsensical beliefs or based on common sense.
10. That Della Rocca's argument does not require the full version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason is emphasised by Casati (2025, 327) and reaffirmed by Della Rocca (2025, 368). This point was also explicitly made in a previous deployment of the argument by Della Rocca (2012, 157).
11. Della Rocca correctly notes that the transitivity of grounding is a necessary condition of the circle. Although I reject the transitivity of grounding, my rejection of the vicious circle will not depend on my rejection of the transitivity of grounding (for my argument against the transitivity of grounding see Rodriguez-Pereyra [2015]; see Schaffer [2012] for a different argument against the transitivity of grounding).
12. I have replaced R' by R^* because, as will soon become clear, I need to use the possessive apostrophe with regards to both R and R' , which would make the reading ungainly. Needless to say, this has no philosophical consequences.
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