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Defending the Dualism of the Practical Reason Against Parfit's Taming

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Abstract

Famously, Sidgwick claimed that practical reason is divided, since the contradictory demands of two competing principles, Rational Egoism and Rational Benevolence, seem equally compelling. John Skorupski (in "Three Methods and a Dualism") argued that there are no competing standards of *pure* practical reason. Recently, Derek Parfit (in Chapter 2 of his unpublished manuscript *Climbing the Mountain*) tamed Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason by regarding it as the idea that in certain cases one might have a sufficient reason *either to promote one's own good or to promote impartially the good*.

This paper reacts to these views. First, Parfit's account is assessed. The main conclusion defended is that Parfit's alleged improvement of Sidgwick's dualism is not dualist at all, and therefore misrepresents the original dualism. Second, the plausibility of a competition between the demands of impartiality and the ideal of prudence within a welfarist framework is defended, against Skorupski's contentions. The main argument here relies on a challenge to the idea that the boundaries and the content of pure practical reason can be precisely determined.

1. *The morals of the Dualism of the Practical reason*

Sidgwick concluded his great book *The Methods of Ethics* in a dramatic tone. Practical reason, he announced, is divided between the irreconcilable demands of two competing and over-encompassing kinds of reasons, self-interested reasons (voiced in the self-evident axioms of Prudence) and impartial ones (expressed in the self-evident axiom of Benevolence):

> even if a man admits the self-evidence of the principle of Rational Benevolence, he may still hold that his own happiness is an end which it is irrational for him to sacrifice to any other; [...] therefore a harmony between the maxim of Prudence and the maxim of Rational Benevolence must be somehow demonstrated, if morality is to be made completely

rational (Sidgwick 1981, p. 498)[1].

As it is also well known, Sidgwick considered not solvable the conflict between prudence and beneficence, unless some theistic hypothesis on the moral order of the world is not proven true: "no complete solution of the conflict between my happiness and the general happiness was possible on the basis of mundane experience. [...] the inseparable connexion between Utilitarian Duty and the greatest happiness of the individual who conforms to it cannot be satisfactorily demonstrated on empirical grounds" (*ibid.*, p. xviii, p. 503)[2]. On a practical level, at least, only a metaphysical guarantee that a self-sacrificing behaviour will be compensated in the afterworld is able to settle the conflict between the rationality of prudence and the reasons to promote the impartially best outcomes:

if [...] we may assume the existence of such a Being, as God, by the *consensus* of theologians, is conceived to be, it seems that Utilitarians may legitimately infer the existence of Divine sanctions to the code of social duty as constructed on a Utilitarian basis; and such sanctions would, of course, suffice to make it always every one's interest to promote universal happiness to the best of his knowledge (Sidgwick 1981, p. 506).

Unfortunately, in his lifelong musings about this matter, Sidgwick never reached warranted conclusions on the truth of theism; the dualism remained for him a perennial, and scandalous, problem[3]. Due to this dualism, practical reason appears unstable in its demands. The conflict, and the ensuing instability, are at two levels: the two axioms both claim self-evidence, but their mutual conflict — even though

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[1] Sidgwick formulates Prudence as the principle that "it is reasonable for a man to act in the manner most conducive to his own happiness" (Sidgwick 1981, p. 119) or "one ought to aim at one's own good" (*ibid.*, p. 381). Prudence seems to be derived from the following axioms: 1. "as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally [...], not merely at a particular part of it" (*ibid.*, p. 382); 2. the principle "of impartial concern for all parts of our conscious life" (*ibid.*, p. 124, n. 1), namely "that Hereafter *as such* is to be regarded neither less nor more than Now" or "that a smaller present good is not to be preferred to a greater future good (allowing for difference of certainty)" (*ibid.*, p. 381).
Instead, Benevolence is the principle that "each one is morally bound to regard the good of any other individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when impartially viewed, or less certainly knowable or attainable by him" (*ibid.*, p. 382). It derives from the following axioms: 1. "as a rational being I am bound to aim at good generally [...], not merely at a particular part of it" (*ibid.*, p. 382); 2. "a smaller present good is not to be preferred to a greater future good (allowing for difference of certainty)" (*ibid.*, p. 381); 3. "the good of any individual is of no more importance, from the point of view (if I may say so) of the Universe, than the good of any other" (*ibid.*, p. 382). On the numbers, the connection and the formulation of those axioms see Schneewind 1977, pp. , Phillips 1998, pp. 70-1.

[2] See also Sidgwick 1981, bk. II, chap. 5, especially pp. 162-3, 175.

[3] See Schultz 2004, chap. 5.

not principled, but due to the empirical predicament of our world[4] — seems to defeat their claim, since consistency is a requirement for genuine self-evidence[5]; moreover, absent any significant pattern of practical reconciliation, we are subjected to conflicting demands, hence our action cannot be determined by rational deliberation. Both theoretical and practical chaos dominate the realm of practical reason:

the negation of the connexion [between Virtue and self-interest] must force us to admit an ultimate and fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is Reasonable in conduct; and from this admission it would seem to follow that the apparently intuitive operation of the Practical Reason, manifested in these contradictory judgments, is after all illusory.

I do not mean that if we gave up the hope of attaining a practical solution of this fundamental contradiction […], it would become reasonable for us to abandon morality altogether: but it would seem necessary to abandon the idea of rationalising it completely. [...] in [...] cases of a recognised conflict between self-interest and duty, practical reason, being divided against itself, would cease to be a motive on either side; the conflict would have to be decided by the comparative preponderance of one or other of two groups of non-rational impulses. [...] the reconciliation of duty and self-interest is to be regarded as a hypothesis

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[4] However, that the conflict issues merely from contingency is a controversial point. What Sidgwick seemed to think about this matter is that the problem is at two levels. In practice, Beneficence and Prudence issue different demands, which in some cases cannot be complied with by doing the same action. This creates a *practical* conflict, occurring frequently but not always (see Sidgwick 1981, pp. xvii-xviii, 84). From the theoretical point of view, however, even when the action dictated by Beneficence coincides with what is best for the agent, thereby being conform to Prudence, practical reason still has a dual source (Sidgwick remarks that "the practical blending of the two systems [i.e. Egoism and Impartialism] is sure to go beyond their theoretical coincidence", *ibid.*, p. 84). (This way of describing the dualism as concerning the source of practical reason is borrowed from Crisp 1996.) It seems that Sidgwick regarded this duality as an imperfection: "we cannot [...] regard as valid reasonings that lead to conflicting conclusions; and I therefore assume as a fundamental postulate of Ethics, that so far as two methods conflict, one or other of them must be modified or rejected" (Sidgwick 1981, p. 6, see also p. 12). For Sidgwick the problem was that, due to facts about the separateness of persons and the boundaries of personal identity, no logical inference from Prudence to Beneficence, or, to put otherwise, no argument able to lead an egoist to endorse beneficence, is available (see *ibid.*, pp. xix-xx, 420-1, 497-8).
Some scholars stress the theoretical puzzle (see Broad 1930, pp. 159, 253), while others emphasise the practical conflict (see Schneewind 1977, pp. 372-4, Frankena 1976, Skorupski 2001, p. 71). These two ways of interpreting the dualism are insightfully reconstructed in Phillips 1998, pp. 58-9. The two levels of conflict in Sidgwick's dualism are clearly outlined in Schultz 2004, pp. 204-56.

[5] "The propositions accepted as self-evident must be mutually consistent. [...] it is obvious that any collision between two intuitions is a proof that there is error in one or the other, or in both. [...] such a collision is absolute proof that at least one of the formulæ needs qualification: and suggests a doubt whether the correctly qualified proposition will present itself with the same self-evidence as the simpler but inadequate one; and whether we have not mistaken for an ultimate and independent axiom one that is really derivative and subordinate" (Sidgwick 1981, p. 341).

logically necessary to avoid a fundamental contradiction in one chief department of our thought (Sidgwick 1981, p. 508)[6].

Sidgwick's dualism of practical reason has attracted efforts from many scholars, and has elicited a host of different interpretations — both in the wide context of the *Methods* (with the aim of establishing the exact meaning of it within Sidgwick's overall ethical theory) and assuming the dualism as an isolated theoretical puzzle. Among many different readings, two opposite views have been presented: according to some, the dualism is an irresolvable conflict, able to defeat any attempt to build a consistent Utilitarian theory. Utilitarianism fails to account for one specific kind of evidently compelling reasons — those connected to the overall good of the agents. In requiring over-demanding self-sacrifices, Utilitarianism provides a counter-intuitive view of morality[7]. Other authors have developed a much milder view about the prospect of Utilitarianism and the impact of the dualism. What the dualism teaches, according to them, is that Utilitarianism has to be softened, and in some way integrated, in order to make possible for it to account for self-interested reasons. The true theory is neither Utilitarianism nor Egoism. Rather, a hybrid view, where Prudence and Beneficence are integrated according to a

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[6] The idea of a chaotic predicament of practical reason appears in the more dramatic final paragraph of the first edition of *The Methods*, subsequently revised by Sidgwick: "the whole system of our beliefs as to the intrinsic reasonableness of conduct must fall, without an hypothesis unverifiable by experience reconciling the Individual with the Universal Reason, without a belief, in some form or other, that the moral order which we see imperfectly realized in this actual world is yet actually perfect. If we reject this belief, we may perhaps still find in the non-moral universe an adequate object for the Speculative Reason, capable of being in some sense ultimately understood. But the Cosmos of Duty is thus really reduced to a Chaos" (Sidgwick 1874, p. 473).

[7] I am here connecting Sidgwick's dualism with the debates on the supposed demandingness of consequentialism (on which see Mulgan 2001, chap. 2). This seems to me a proper conduct, since Sidgwick himself conceived of the dualism as a problem concerning the rationality, and the extent, of self-sacrificing for moral reasons: "it would seem that, according to the common view of 'good', there are occasions in which an individual's sacrifice of his own good on the whole, according to the most rational conception of it that he can form, would apparently realise greater good for others. Whether, indeed, such a sacrifice is ever really required, and whether, if so, it is truly reasonable for the individual to sacrifice his own good on the whole, are among the profoundest questions of ethics" (Sidgwick, 1981, pp. 109-10 n. 1, see also pp. 431-2).

plausible view of their respective spheres, is to be preferred[8]. A common aim of those views seems to be to provide an improvement of Sidgwick's dualism, in terms both of stability and plausibility. A recent version of this approach is put forward by Derek Parfit, in his forthcoming book *Climbing the Mountain*[9]. Parfit seems more interested to outline a general model, than to articulate the details of a specific theory. The plausibility of any hybrid views, of course, is to be assessed by considering its specific tenets about the weight to be given to self-interested and impartial reasons. However, here I follow Parfit's general approach in considering dualism as a general theoretical scheme, and not as a specific and fully developed theory[10].

In what follows, I shall try to show some reasons why this model is to be rejected. The morals of the dualism is not so comfortable as the supporters of hybrid views claim. Sidgwick's dualism entails either that the strictest monist theories about our reasons for action — Impartialism[11] and Egoism — are doomed to failure, or that the path to a true theory of reasons for action requires to settle the conflict in favour of one, and only one, of these competing candidates. (As Sidgwick said, "in consequence of this perception [i.e. the perception of the conflict], moral choice of the general happiness or acquiescence in self-interest as ultimate, became practically necessary", Sidgwick 1981, p. xviii.) In either case, the task for theorists is more difficult, and the prospects dimmer, than the new dualists allow.

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[8] The most famous hybrid views of morality and practical reasons are presented in Scheffler, 1982, and Gert 1998, chap. 3, especially pp. 59-61, 69-73. On the relations between such views and Sidgwick's dualism, see Crisp 1996, pp. 64-5, Phillips 1998, especially pp. 72-3 (where the philosophical plausibility of those views of morality is advocated), as well as Phillips 2001. Another conflict-mitigating reading of Sidgwick's dualism is Brink 1988 and 1992. (The label "conflict-mitigating" is in Phillips 1998, p. 69.) Brink dispels the conflict by assuming that Rational Egoism is a theory of rationality, while Utilitarianism is a view on morality, and that those two levels are not conceptually linked. Brink's account for the dualism does not imply any hybrid view, though.
Hybrid views are possible both in the realm of morality and in the sphere of practical rationality. Gert's theory is a hybrid view of rationality (even if Gert draws the consequences of it for morality, Gert's view of morality is a pluralistic one, see Gert 1988, chs. 7 and 8), while Scheffler's proposal is a hybrid theory of morality. Crisp 1996, pp. 58-73 defends a hybrid view, different both from Scheffler's and Gert's. Here, I shall not consider the implications of moving from rationality to morality, and viceversa.

[9] The manuscript I am here using is the July 2006 version, diffused by Pablo Stafforini, in his web-site (http://users.ox.ac.uk/~ball2568/parfit/). The pages considered appear in chs. 2 and 3, §§ 6-7. I heard that Parfit has now revised the manuscript on the whole. Unfortunately, I did not find any public access to this revised version. Accordingly, I am considering here what Parfit claims in the 2006 version. From now, references to the manuscript are given in the main text.

[10] A detailed discussion of many different hybrid views is in Phillips 2001.

[11] I shall follow Parfit and Skorupski 2001, pp. 68-71 in calling Impartialism what Sidgwick called Utilitarianism, i.e. the method that dictates pursuance of the greatest happiness, assessed impartially.

In what follows, I shall mainly focus on Parfit's dualist theory of the reasons for action. Parfit gives an outline of Sidgwick's dualism in the context of his own theory. His aim seems to provide a new version of the dualism, somewhat revised — at least as contrasted to Sidgwick's original statement. Parfit seems to assume that some form of dualism is possible and that the problem in Sidgwick's dualism is not with the contrast itself, but rather with the alleged reasons Sidgwick saw for this contrast and the way he conceived it. Accordingly, Parfit implies that the morals of Sidgwick's dualism is not that only a monist view of practical reasons is acceptable, but rather that dualism is the true account, provided it is suitably revised[12].

I shall try to show that Parfit's revision might appear less unstable than Sidgwick's original conflict simply because it is not a dualist theory at all, in no clear sense of the term "dualist". Moreover, in so far as Parfit's view contains some dualistic elements, they are not less puzzling than the original conflicting tenets in Sidgwick's dualism. In particular, Parfit seems to think that a dualism of sufficient reasons is more acceptable than a conflict among decisive reasons. This claim will be questioned. Accordingly, even Parfit's courageous manoeuvre to soften the drama of the struggle between Prudence and Benevolence confirms Sidgwick's original teaching about the necessity of monism in practical rationality.

I shall consider also a different strategy, whose outcome is similar to Parfit's manoeuvre. John Skorupski implied that Sidgwick's alleged dualism is at most pluralism among many different kinds of reasons, and that *pure* practical reason is untouched by it, since in it only impartialism is contained. I shall suggest that pluralism does not rule out dualism, and the boundaries of pure practical reason are more porous and blurry than Skorupski admitted.

Accordingly, the following pages are to be considered a defence of Sidgwick's original Dualism of the Practical Reason, but not a defence of dualism as a model for any theory about reasons for action.

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[12] Parfit unpacks Sidgwick's claims on the dualism of the practical reason, picking up two dualisms. First, there is the dualism between Rational Egoism and Rational Impartialism, as theory of reasons. Then, there is the conflict between Moral Rationalism, i.e. the view that "We always have most reasons to do our duty. It could not be rational to act in any way that we believe to be wrong", and Rational Egoism (p. 69). The latter, according to Parfit, is created by the lack of any necessary guarantee that duty and interest coincide. The two dualisms overlap, Parfit explains, only assuming (as Sidgwick did) that our duty is always to do what is impartially best (see pp. 70, 276 n. 53). Parfit rejects this view of our duty. Possibly, Parfit's view here displays some resemblance to David Brink's interpretation of the dualism as a conflict between egoism as a theory of rationality and utilitarianism as a moral view, on an externalist background (see Brink 1988, and 1992, pp. 202-6). I shall here consider the alternative between egoism and impartialism as placed on the same footing, whether this is a theory of rationality or a view of morality. The connection between a hybrid view of rationality and the issue of the link between reason and morality is discussed in Gert 1998, chap. 13. Discussing the connection between morality and rationality is not my concern here.

2. *Is Parfit new dualism really a dualism?*

Parfit deploys two strategies to deal with Sidgwick's dualism. First, he rejects Sidgwick's strategy of conciliation, based on the search for cases in which self-interested deeds and impartially best courses of action coincide. Rather, he tries to show that there are both cases of successful coexistence between different kinds of reason and other situations where some hierarchy of different reasons is possible. Where Sidgwick wavers between conflicts and coincidence, and struggled in vain to reduce the first to the second, Parfit tries to show that there is a viable coexistence between different kinds of reasons, and more space to produce a hierarchy than Sidgwick thought. Second, Parfit gives up decisive, or overall reasons, by stating his new dualist position in terms of merely sufficient reasons. I shall discuss the first strategy in this section, postponing the second one to the next two sections.

Sidgwick's dualism between prudence and beneficence has both a dark and a light face. The dualism is both the idea that practical reason has a dual source — namely, that there are different kinds of facts able to give us reasons to act —, and the worry that those two sources might in some cases be conflicting[13]. It is fairly obvious that there are cases in which one and the same action will be favoured both from the point of view of Prudence and from the perspective of Beneficence. In some situations, the impartially best action amounts to what is best for the agent — think of the many frequent cases where the individual only is involved in the effects of her action, and any other people could act as she wish without either losing or gaining; or think of those impartial behaviours which, due to the actual situation, are necessarily part of a self-interested conduct (for instance, co-operation in a small-scale life-saving enterprise not performable on one's own, such as when a man helps his fellow sailors to repair a sinking boat on which he is).

In this sort of cases, one may still see that two different reasons to act are around. There are different facts giving reasons to act: the agent's well-being and the overall well-being impartially considered. However, due to the contingent features of the situation, those reasons happen to favour the same action. This can be called a case of *coincidence* of different reasons. The problem comes in when two different actions are favoured by the two sources of practical reason. The clearest instance of this kind of cases is when a self-sacrifice will be an unavoidable outcome of, or a necessary means to, acting in the impartially best way (paying taxes when the needed amount to deliver a helpful public service was already given by our fellow ciizens is a case in point). In those cases, practical reason is not only twofold, or divided, but internally conflicted.

Sidgwick thought that the only viable solution was in reducing any case of conflict to a case of coincidence. Accordingly, he concluded that certainty about a

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[13] Notice that this way of describing the dualism is distinctively un-Sidgwickian. As indicated above (see n. 3), given Sidgwick's commitment to an ideal of the practical reason as a unique source of prescriptions, the discovery of a dual source is as much a problem as any practical conflict deriving from this duality.

reward (or a punishment) in the afterworld, able to ensure a strict coincidence between virtuous action and rational self-interested behaviour, was the only path to avoid practical chaos. Parfit's audacious novelty is to reject Sidgwick's suggestions concerning the possible solution of the conflict, even though assuming the dualism as a practical and theoretical puzzle. Parfit claims that Sidgwick's mistake lay in assuming that self-interested and impartial reasons are *wholly incomparable* (see pp. 60-1). In Parfit's reading, the dualism issues from the fact that Sidgwick believed that no truth about the different weight or strength of self-interested and impartial reasons could be found out, and this belief in its turn was a consequence of Sidgwick's view that those reasons arise from two irreconcilable perspectives, that of one's own self and that of an impartial observer — the so-called point of view of the universe[14]. A reconciliation would require a third, more encompassing, point of view. Since this third perspective is not available, the clash results.

Parfit denies the latter argument (see pp. 61-4). He rejects the idea that different reasons should be assessed from different points of view. There is only one perspective, the perspective we inhabit as individual agents, from which we assess our reasons. However, this does not prevent us from grasping impartial reasons as such, as well as partial, but not personal, ones. The impartial content of certain reasons does not issue out of the point of view from which they are considered, or worked out. Rather, some reasons are impartial in that they arise in certain kinds of facts, for instance facts concerning the well-being of the individuals concerned. Other reasons, given by fact concerning the agent's well-being, are self-interested. Reasons arising from facts about the well-being of person to whom one have close ties are partial, but not personal:

Sidgwick overstates the rational importance of personal identity. As Sidgwick claims, we have reasons to be specially concerned about our own future well-being. But we have other, similar reasons. Our reasons to care about our future are in part provided, not by the fact that this future will be *ours*, but by various psychological relations between ourselves as we are now and our future selves. Most of us have partly similar relations to some other people, such as our close relatives, and those we love. [...] Our relations to these people give us reasons to be specially concerned about their well-being. We can have reasons to benefit these people which are much stronger than some of our reasons to benefit ourselves. So we can reject Sidgwick's claim that, from our personal point of view, self-interested reasons are supreme.

As well as having these *personal* and *partial* reasons to care about the well-being of certain people, we also have *impartial* reasons, I have claimed, to care about everyone's well-being. Sidgwick's claims seem to imply that we have such reasons only when we consider things from an impartial point of view. But that is not so. [...] we have such impartial reasons even when our actual point of view is not impartial. We can have reasons to benefit strangers

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[14] As Phillips 1998, p. 76 signals, Sidgwick presented a conception of the dualism in terms of different points of view in a particularly clear passage of the third edition of *Methods*: "there is something that it is reasonable [a human individual] to desire, when he considers himself as an independent unit, and something again which he must recognize as reasonably to be desired, when he takes the point of view of the larger whole" (Sidgwick 1884, p. 402). See also Phillips 1998, p. 61.

that conflict with, and are stronger than, some of our self-interested reasons.

[...] we can agree that, for some purposes, it is worth asking, what we would have most reason to want, or prefer, if we were in the impartial position of some outside observer. That may help us to avoid some kinds of bias. [...] But, when we ask what we have most reason to do, we ought to ask this question from our actual point of view. We should not ignore some of our actual reasons merely because we would not have these reasons if we had some other, merely imagined point of view (pp. 63-4).

Sidgwick's worries, Parfit acknowledges, are exaggerated, but not completely unwarranted. Self-interested and impartial reasons, after all, are given by different facts, and this makes them only roughly comparable. In other words, there are no precise truth about their relative strength, nor a scale on which we could compare those different reasons. However, it is not the case that any comparison is ruled out. Clearly, in some cases, reasons belonging to one kind are patently weaker or stronger, even if the relative differential in weight among them are not clearly fixed. For instance, Parfit remarks, "on some [...] views, when we are choosing between morally permissible acts, we are always rationally required to give to our own well-being greater weight than we give to any stranger's well-being; but this requirement is very imprecise, since the amount of extra weight might be anywhere between *slightly more* and *many times as much*" (p. 67)

Accordingly, Parfit's strategy in dealing with the contrast between self-interested and impartial reasons does not turn on a reduction of conflicts to cases of coinciding reasons. Rather, Parfit insists on some rough comparability among different kinds of reason, which allows us to establish in single cases whether one reason is weaker or stronger than a competing one — even though we cannot establish precise differences in their relative weights.

Parfit's main revision, then, consists in moving from Sidgwick's dualism ("we always have most reason to do whatever would be impartially best, unless some other act would be best for ourselves. In such cases, we would have sufficient reasons to act in either way. If we knew the relevant facts, either act would be rational", pp. 59-60) to a slight revised dualism where rough comparisons between different kinds of reasons are sometimes possible: "when one possible act would be impartially best, but some other act would be best [...] for ourselves [...], we often have sufficient reasons to act in either way" (p. 64)[15].

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[15] To be true, Parfit's dualism makes room for reasons to be prudent, impartial as well as partial towards one's one nearest and dearest. In such a respect, it is rather a form of pluralism than a dualism. Parfit seems to agree with the idea that there are not only two kinds of reasons — self-interested and impartial —, but rather several kinds of reasons to act (a point made in connection with Sidgwick's dualism by Skorupski 2001, p. 62). Here, I shall not consider Parfit's pluralism. It is to be noticed, however, that a pluralist view of practical reason does not rule out dualism — contrary to what Skorupski 2001 claims. It is perfectly possible that there are several different kinds of reasons and that two of them mutually collide (see section 5 below).

In this new dualism, comparisons of different reasons are ensured by the word "often", as Parfit points out (see p. 64). In other words, Parfit's scheme allows for some cases where one would not have sufficient reasons to act either upon self-interested or upon impartial reason. Thus, this new dualism avoids what Parfit deems an unacceptable implication of Sidgwick's dualism, i.e. the idea that self-interested and impartial reasons are always *supreme*[16]. This idea is exactly what makes paradoxical and unstable the original dualism.

Parfit's new dualism, then, delivers the following regulations: in certain cases, self-interested and impartial reasons are to be considered equivalent, and agents can act in either way; in other cases, self-interested reasons should prevail, while in certain other situations impartial reasons should be preferred. Parfit's idea is that, in acknowledging cases in which self-interested reasons could override impartial reasons — even though those cases are limited —, as well as cases in which the two kind of reasons are both admitted, this revised theory is both really dualistic and more stable than Sidgwick's original dualism: Parfit does not specify either the case where self-interested or impartial reasons prevail, or the exact amount of weight that make them overriding. Indeed, his point about rough comparability has just the sense that those issues cannot be settled in not controversial ways, and once for all.

The main perplexity this strategy elicits can be expressed in the following question: Could dualism stand up when comparability — even if only rough — is allowed? After all, Parfit's comparability is a rough one only because of the fact that the differentials between the weights of self-interested and impartial reasons are wavering in different cases, and in different theories. However, any comparability entails that there is a unique rationale underlying any judgement on reasons. In other words, across the three sorts of cases made possible in Parfit's model — indifference or coexistence, prevalence of self-interested reasons or prevalence of impartial ones — there is a unique scale, a continuous metric, through which the balance of reasons is established. When self-interested and impartial reasons coexist, this does not come out of an acknowledgement of their demands — which, by the very definition of Rational egoism and Rational impartialism, are extreme demands. Rather, those reasons are weighted, and it turns out that their weights compensate each other. Even though there is no precise truth about the exact differentials in single cases, or even if those truth are context-dipendent, or otherwise wavering, there is still a comparative measurement able to dispel any dualistic element. To be true, there are two different kinds of reasons; however, they are different only in their content, but not conflicting in their demands. By contrast, it is the latter sort of conflict to be embedded in Sidgwick's dualism.

If this is the logic underlying Parfit's first strategy, then it hardly can aspire to be a new dualism, or even an improvement on Sidgwick's dualism. It seems rather a subtle form of impartialism, adjusted to account for the weight of self-interested reasons within a larger calculus made from an impartial point of view. After all, cases of coexistence of self-interested and impartial reasons, as well as of prevalence

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[16] Or *hegemonic*, as Skorupski 2001, p. 71 characterises them.

of self-interest, are admitted in any sound version of the axiom of beneficence. At least in Sidgwick's conception, impartialism is not to be construed as a claim to the effect that only facts about one's own personal good are sources of reasons[17]. At least as it is voiced in Sidgwick's axiom of Benevolence ("the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view [...] of the Universe, than the good of any other; *unless, that is, there are special grounds for believing that more good is likely to be realised in the one case than in the other*", Sidgwick 1981, p. 382, my emphasis[18]), impartialism does not overlook that facts about the personal good could give reasons to act (while, perhaps, Prudence overlooks that facts about the overall good could). Rather, it denies that facts about the personal good are always able to provide a decisive reason to act, or, to put it otherwise, that self-interested reasons are always overriding. Impartialism is not a claim on the source of reasons, even though perhaps Prudence it is; rather it is a claim on the force of reasons. Accordingly, maybe the two axioms are not parallel in their content. Furthermore, the two axioms are conflictual but not exactly contradictory, since Impartialism could, in some cases, allow for some of the demands of Egoism[19].

It could be objected that Parfit's view is still a dualism, even though in it some priority is assigned to an impersonal perspective[20]. However, to give some priority to an impersonal or impartial perspective, but allowing for a special concern devoted to self-interested reasons does not amount to compare self-interested and impartial reasons; rather, it means to allow that even less weighty reasons could prevail, if they are self-interested ones. And this seems to be a departure from comparability, even from rough comparability. Parfit seems to claim that always there is some path to decide how much extra-weight to give to different kinds of reasons, that there is some pre-determined way to obtain determinacy, except that in genuine cases of equally strong reasons. This commitment is what a genuine dualism should reject[21].

Consequently, the problem with Parfit's first strategy seems to be that by permitting comparisons between different reasons he introduces a monistic device, which makes only superficial the dualistic elements. The spirit of the original conflict, as Sidgwick conceived it, lies exactly in the idea that two different kinds of reason both aspire to be supreme[22]. Parfit observes that such a claim is an absurd one. This is right. What is wrong, however, is to purport that even giving up this claim one could have a dualism between competing principles about reasons to act.

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[17] As Skorupski contends (see Skorupski 2001, p. 69).

[18] In "Some Fundamental Ethical Controversies", Sidgwick mentioned "the principle that another's great good is to be preferred to one's own lesser good" (Sidgwick 2000, p. 43).

[19] This is an aspect emphasised in Phillips 1998, p. 70, Skorupski 2001, pp. 69-71.

[20] A view of this kind is outlined in Phillips 2001, pp. 443-4.

[21] Cf. Phillips 2001, pp. 445—6.

[22] Cf. Frankena 1976, p. 198.

3. Taming the dualism: Parfit's move from obligations to permissions, from decisive to sufficient reasons

Contrary to Rational Egoism and Rational Impartialism, Parfit's dualism is in terms of sufficient reasons. Parfit calls *decisive* those reasons which are, "when taken together, stronger than any set of reasons we may have to act in some other way" (p. 22). By contrast, *sufficient* reasons are those reasons which "are not weaker than any set of reasons we may have to do anything else" (*ibid.*).

Those definitions make plain enough that any dualist position should be in terms of sufficient reasons. Since decisive reasons are stronger than any set of alternative reasons, while sufficient reasons are not weaker than alternative ones, then two equally strong reasons should be sufficient ones. The two conflicting decisive reasons expressed in Rational Egoism and Rational Impartialism are supposed to be *equally strong*, or *equally decisive* — otherwise, no conflict would obtain. For Sidgwick, Prudence and Beneficence both aspire to a complete ruling of the realm of action, as well as to self-evidence. Therefore, a conflict of decisive reasons may be settled by substituting to it two merely sufficient reasons, or a disjunctive sufficient reason.

It seems, then, that Parfit has a monist view of decisive reasons, and a dualist account of sufficient ones. Contrary to appearances, this is inconsistent enough. Why do two equally strongly decisive reasons raise a puzzle, whereas two equally sufficient ones can be accepted? Parfit's commitment to comparability, highlighted in the previous section, entails that a not conflictual coexistence of two different sufficient reasons is possible when they have exactly the same weight and strength - or when they hover over an interval that is considered irrelevant as to the force of them. Parfit's speaking of rough comparability is not to be interpreted as allowing that coexistence is possible when there is a relevant difference in weight. Even assuming a discrete scale of weight, where there are discontinuous levels and thresholds, if comparability is introduced (in any clear sense of it), then different reasons are balanced when their weights, no matter how precisely measured, are equivalent.

However, if two reasons are equal in their weight, despite being merely sufficient, the pragmatic and theoretical puzzle is the same than with equally strong decisive reasons. Either conflicting reasons can be accepted or they should be refused. Again, monism and dualism are alternate and mutually excluding patterns, and dualism seems inherently unstable.

The above is not the only problem with sufficient reasons, though. In his discussion, Parfit seems to imply that Sidgwick's dualism is a moderate view, more acceptable and true than Rational Egoism and Rational Impartialism, even though it is able to keep some of the original import of those two competing views. This seems to hold also for Parfit's revised dualism. In particular, Parfit seems to endorse the idea, advocated by David Phillips, that Sidgwick's dualism amounts to the view that in certain cases practical reason is *indeterminate* in its demands. The indeterminacy comes when practical reason issues a disjunctive prescription, to the effect that either

of two different behaviours — the self-interested and the impartial — are permissible[23].

However, Sidgwick's original dualism is a conflict between two competing principles. In *The Methods of Ethics* there are no passages confirming the idea that Sidgwick allowed that practical reason could be indeterminate[24]. Accordingly, it is doubtful whether Parfit's reading of the dualism is able to account for this feature of Sidgwick's conception of practical reason. A conflict of two competing principles of action amounts to two contradictory obligations — especially if the reasons involved are decisive ones. There are no reasons to think that Sidgwick conceived of Egoism and Impartialism as sources of merely sufficient reasons. Now, Parfit's dualism deals with sufficient, not decisive, reasons, as already noticed. It is not clear whether sufficient reasons amount to obligations. When I have a sufficient reason to do a given action, it seems that I have not different decisive reasons to the contrary, but also that I have not any decisive reason in favour of that action. Then, sufficient reasons seem to correspond to permissions. Consequently, Parfit's dualism states that acting upon self-interested reasons and complying with impartial reasons are both permitted, but not strictly required. Parfit's dualism, then, entails a disjunctive permission.

However, it is not clear whether this is a legitimate inference. Sidgwick's dualism presents a conflict of obligations. To be true, some change in this logical structure should be done, if one wishes to settle the conflict. However, moving from obligations to permissions does not seem what is needed. It seems much more proper to move from two contradictory obligations to a disjunctive obligation having as its content the original contents of the competing obligations. "Obligation to be prudent" and "Obligation to be impartial" may to be transformed, then, in "obligation to be either prudent or impartial". If so, it seems rather odd to claim that, in order to settle the conflict, we should move to "permission to be either prudent or impartial". Coming back to the language of the reasons, then, it seems that a possible settlement of the conflict between decisive self-interested and impartial reasons is to

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[23] This is apparent in Parfit's very formulation of Sidgwick's dualism: "we always have most reason to do whatever would be impartially best, unless some other act would be best for ourselves. In such cases, we would have sufficient reason to act *in either way*. [...] *either act* would be rational" (pp. 59-60, my emphasis). Parfit ascribed Sidgwick with an indeterminacy view of practical reason also in *Reasons and Persons* (see Parfit 1984, p. 462), even though there he did not argued for this interpretation — as it is pointed out in Phillips 1998, p. 75 n. 7.

[24] Indeed, there is at least a sentence that seems to rule out an indeterminacy view: "it is irrational to let sometimes one principle prevail and sometimes another" (Sidgwick 1981, p. 14). In proposing his interpretation of the dualism as an indeterminacy view of practical reason, David Phillips warily writes that "Sidgwick *may, and ought to have,* thought" so (Phillips 1998, p. 59; my emphasis), and that "even if Sidgwick didn't consistently endorse the indeterminacy view, it is the view which he *should have* endorsed, given his account of the self-evident bases for egoism and utilitarianism" (*ibid.*, p. 62; see also pp. 66, 72). That Phillips's reading is a faithful interpretation of Sidgwick's texts is a different matter, however, with which I am not concerned here.

be found in a decisive reason to be either prudent or impartial. In other words, disjunction is surely needed, as Parfit rightly sees. Merely sufficient reasons, instead, seem to produce an excessive weakening of the original views. Parfit's dualism, in a sense, is excessively tamed[25].

This is not to say that any dualist view is non-sensical or unsound by default. Possibly, Parfit's new dualism, and especially a version of it Parfit dubs the "pure dualist view", is immediately sensible, for the simple reason that it reproduces very well our common-sense or intuitive morality. Parfit's pure dualism is as follows: "when we are choosing between two morally permissible acts, of which one would be better for ourselves and the other would be better for one or more strangers, we could rationally either give greater weight to our own well-being, or give equal weight to everyone's well-being" (p. 67)[26]. In its full implications, this view entails the following requirements and permissions: we are permitted to do what is the best for us, as well as what is impartially best; we are not obliged to do either the best for us or the impartial best; however, we are required not to privilege others over ourselves — i.e. not any amount of self-sacrifice is permitted, but only that self-sacrifice whose amount is, in comparison, outweighed by the other's good produced. Moreover, the outweighing should be high, or at least beyond a certain threshold. As Parfit says, "I could rationally save one of my fingers rather than saving some stranger's life, but I could nor rationally save some *stranger's* finger rather than *my* life" (p. 67).

However, Pure dualism is strikingly different from Sidgwick's dualism, considered as a view where the demands of Rational egoism and Rational impartialism are in some sense voiced, for the simple reason that the latter views are much more demanding than the egoist and impartialist elements contained in Pure dualism. Moreover, Pure dualism may not be true, or truer than any alternative view. Or, at least, this view rarely is accepted without emendations, even by full-fledged supporters of reflective equilibrium or other coherentist styles of justification. The most plausible emendations, though, consist in toughening certain requests, turning mere permissions in obligations. Unfortunately, any move of this kind leads to the original dualism, with its inherent instability.

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[25] Phillips's indeterminacy view, I believe, captures this aspect of Sidgwick's dualism, contrary to Parfit's reading. Phillips formulates the indeterminacy view in terms of quasi-requirements, and not of mere permissions. Consider the following passage: "The kind of permission which rationality issues, according to the indeterminacy view, is not a mere permission; it is very close to a requirement. As we saw, one way to express the indeterminacy view is that rationality *requires* that we do either what utilitarianism dictates or what egoism dictates" (Phillips 1998, p. 65; but see also Phillips 2001, p. 441). Crisp 1996, pp. 71-2 seems to defend a view in which, in some circumstances, there are decisive self-interested reasons able to override reasons to promote the good, which therefore are merely *pro tanto*.

[26] This view seems to correspond to what in Phillips 1998, pp. 59-60 is called the "enhanced indeterminacy view".

4. The morals of the dualism (again), and another taming manoeuvre

A different strategy to deal with Sidgwick's dualism is in terms of denial. Some authors claims that Sidgwick's dualism is merely apparent, especially since Prudence or Rational egoism is an inflated view, and the prudential elements in our common-sense practical rationality are less demanding and conflictual than Sidgwick thought[27]. Here, I shall consider a different strategy with the same purpose, deployed by John Skorupski. The overall point of the strategy is to deny the conflict by placing the conflicting views at different levels[28].

Skorupski claims that the dualism is less worrying than Sidgwick thought since it is not placed within *pure* practical reason. Egoism, in Skorupski's reconstruction, is a claim about the reason-giving force of actions promoting the agent's own good: "the fact that an action will promote the agent's own good to some degree gives that agent a reason of proportionate degree to perform that action" (Skorupski 2001, p. 70). Now, Skorupski explains, a person's good is what there is a reason for that person to desire. Reasons to desire, Skorupski claims, yield reasons to act upon the specific disposition of that feeling, which is a disposition to try to get the desired object. Accordingly, if one has reason to desire a given object, she has also a reason to obtain, achieve or bring about it. Nevertheless, those reasons, being rooted in reasons to desire, do not come from *pure* practical reason, i.e. from reason alone. Instead, they find their source in a personal acquaintance with the relevant feeling, and in what Skorupski calls "the hermeneutics" of it. Moreover, there are many reasons similarly related to the various feelings it is reasonable to have, in various concrete situations. For instance, the fact of having received an unexpected benefit from someone, "out of sheer goodness of heart" (to use Skorupski's saying), gives me reasons to feel grateful. In addition, those reasons are connected to reasons to express that feeling, or to act upon the characteristic dispositions of it — such as returning the favour, thanking, and so on. Indeed, Skorupski claims that this connection between reasons to feel and reasons to act holds quite in general, and can be stated in the form of the following Feeling/ Disposition Principle: "if there's reason to feel φ there's reason to do what feeling φ characteristically disposes one to do" (Skroupski 2001, p. 74). What is characteristic of such cases is that only by grasping the relevant feelings, and their connection with concrete forms of life and action, one can find out what has reasons to feel and to do[29].

Being a principle about one's own good, then, egoism concerns a specific feeling, desire. Accordingly, it is not a principle of pure practical reason. By contrast, impartialism is merely a requirement of impartiality imposed upon the pursuance of

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[27] See, for instance, Holley 2002, Shaver 1999, pp. 74-98.

[28] A similar view is defended by Brink 1988 and 1992, who dispels the conflict by placing egoism in the realm of practical rationality and utilitarianism in the sphere of morality, and positing an externalist lack of conceptual connection between the two spheres. See above n. 8.

[29] See Skorupski 2001, pp. 74—8.

the good. Here is Skorupski's statement of impartialism: "the fact that an action will promote to some degree the good of beings overall, taking the good of all beings into account by some impartial principle, gives anyone a reason of proportionate degree to do that action" (Skorupski 2001, p. 70). Even though impartialism makes reference to desires, in using the notion of good, this does not place it outside pure practical reason. Its point is to require impartiality, which in itself does not need any insight into the feelings involved.

Skorupski draws two conclusions from the above reasoning. There is no dualism of pure practical reason, since impartialism has no serious contenders[30]. Moreover, there is no dualism in practical reason at large, since there is a plurality of reasons to feel and to act connected to various feelings and various circumstances: "an irreducible variety of reasonable feelings gives rise to an irreducible variety of underived reasons to act" (Skorupski 2001, p. 81). Pluralism, rather than dualism, is the characteristic feature of practical reason at large.

Skorupski's view is another way of taming the dualism. Against it, the following objections can be raised. First, pluralism does not rule out dualism. As already remarked[31], it is perfectly possible that there is a plurality of reasons, or of principles, and that two of them collide. Given his conception of practical reason, of course, Sidgwick would consider pluralism as much puzzling as dualism is. However, this does not amount to say that, if pluralism is accepted, than dualism is freed from its puzzles, or dispelled. To posit a plurality of reasons does not settle the question about the coexistence of them. If those reasons are harmonious enough, then coexistence is possible. However, if those reasons collide, in that they issue alternative demands, at least at a practical level the puzzle remains. Moreover, it is perfectly conceivable that the demands of egoism could be particularly ambitious, and then that they could clash with several other reasons, even with reasons different from those connected to impartialism. Gratitude, for instance, could in some cases require self-sacrifice. Accordingly, even in the pluralist framework outlined by Skorupski, there can be a sort of dualism between self-interested reasons and the remaining reasons taken together.

Second, it is far from clear that egoism, even assuming a person's good as what that person has reason to desire, is external to pure practical reason. Skorupski acknowledges that desire, and egoism, are special cases of the Feeling/Disposition Principle. However, the specific status of desire, especially when in a broad definition of a person's good, is such to make doubtful any alignment between desire and other feelings. Arguably, the claim that when something is good for me I have reasons to desire it does not demand possession of specific mental states as other claims about different feelings do. The desire here involved is a thin attitude,

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[30] Skorupski claims that impartialism is indefeasible. It cannot be overruled by other principles, contrary to the many reasons to feel and to act obtaining in the realm of not pure practical reason (see Skorupski, 2001, p. 79).

[31] See n. 15 above.

corresponding to what some authors calls a pro-attitude[32]. In a reasonable desire for one's own good there is no particular phenomenological quality involved; or at least a particular phenomenology does not need to be involved in order that some pro-attitude counts as a desire for one's own good. If I have reasons to feel grateful, besides reasons to express that sentiment, and to act in the characteristic ways, I have reasons to put me in a characteristic phenomenology. To feel grateful amounts to making experience of a bunch of different sensations and complex mental states, made up of very complex patterns of reflection, memory and feeling. A grateful person understands the reasons and the particular mode of the benefit done to her, remembers particulars, feels bouts of warm tenderness in thinking to her benefactor and to her deeds, and so on. This kind of feelings and mental experience is the repository from which knowledge about the reasons to feel comes.

Nothing similar obtains in the phenomenology of desire. Desiring the good, or even merely desiring something, is not a peculiar complex mental state. Or, at least, it is not a specific mental state from a phenomenological and experiential perspective. Perhaps, the knowledge requested to establish whether one has reason to desire something is less formal and pure than a mere requirement of impartiality, or the claim that "the good of any being is agent-neutrally good" (Skorupski 2001, p. 81). After all, this knowledge concerns what is good for persons, and this can be a matter more substantively rich than mere impartiality.

Nevertheless, it might be argued that evaluative knowledge, namely knowledge of what is good, is not necessarily less abstract or formal than normative principles, such as impartiality. After all, impartiality does not end with mere generalization. A relevant part of it concerns our grasp of what is morally relevant and what can instead be overlooked. Impartiality is similar treatment of similar cases. But nothing is similar to nothing, if the irrelevant features are not bracketed. Accordingly, a continuity in different layers of knowledge is what we face. From formal requirements of impartiality to the knowledge requested to apply them, to evaluative knowledge of what is good, to the knowledge of the various feelings and their fittingness to divers situations. If this continuous picture is accepted, pure practical reason may appear not precisely distinguishable from the other spheres of practical reason at large. The allegedly pure practical reason is not different, if not in a trivial way, from other spheres of practical reason. Therefore, the conflicts among different reasons come back to the fore.

5. Conclusions

The main conclusion here defended is that Sidgwick's dualism of the practical reason has an inescapable morals, which can be expressed as follows. Two conflicting monist principles, Prudence and Beneficence (egoism and impartialism, to use different labels), are present in practical reason. Each of them aspires to absolute sovereignty on our actions. Unfortunately, they are only partially true, and none of them is able to account for all the reasons to act we find around. Accordingly,

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[32] See, for instance, Schueler 1995, pp. 29-38.

some sort of conciliation, able to settle the conflict as well as to save some of the elements of the competing principles, is to be found.

However, a dualistic pattern of conciliation seems to be peculiarly unstable. Either the form of dualism proposed, after reflection, amounts to one of the monist principles in competition (generally to a revised form of impartialism), or it is not a settlement of the conflict, but a mere shifting of it to a different level. This has been shown by considering Derek Parfit's revision of Sidgwick's dualism in his forthcoming *Climbing the Mountain,* as well as some suggestions by John Skorupski, aimed to deny that a conflict occurs within pure practical reason. Alas, the path to a successful overcome of Sidgwick's dualism is still to be discovered.

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