I. Introduction

A theme running through the first three parts of Derek Parfit’s monumental book, *Reasons and Persons*¹, is the criticism of the self-interest theory, S. Its central claim is that there is one supreme rational aim: that one’s own life go, for oneself, as well as possible (p. 4).

How the notion of things going well for somebody is to be understood is of course controversial. I shall here avoid any assumptions about there being objective values. Instead I shall take it for granted that the notion should be explicated by reference to the fulfilment of desires of the subject. The details of such an explication must here be left unspecified.

Parfit highlights two aspects of S. One is its partiality in personal matters. Each being is to have a bias towards itself: it should be governed by an aim to make things go, for itself, as well as possible or, in other words, to maximize the fulfilment of its own desires². The second aspect is a temporal neutrality within these confines: one’s master aim should be that things go, for oneself, as well as possible throughout one’s entire life, that one’s satisfaction be inter-temporally maximized.

From this description Parfit infers that “the Self-interest Theory lies between morality [M] and the Present-aim Theory [P]” (p. 126). M is then seen as a theory that requires both temporal and personal neutrality (§ 55). P “rejects the requirements both of personal and temporal neutrality” (p. 140); it “tells each to do what will best achieve his present aims” (p. 92; my italics). Placed in-between these two, S is a hybrid theory in that it “rejects the requirement of personal neutrality, but requires temporal neutrality” (p. 140). It is incompletely neutral or relative.

According to Parfit, this makes the position of S precarious: it can be attacked from the direction both of M and of P. In view of the strong analogy between the words “I” and “now” – both being indexicals – it would seem that either both or neither of them must be eliminated from the basis of rational deliberation. In other words, S is defeated either by M or by P.
This way of setting things up makes rivals of S, M and P. One gets the impression, for instance, that if either M or S is victorious, P is a loser. Call this the rivalry-model, the R-model. In *Reasons and Persons*, I wish to claim it exists alongside another model that may be termed the common-denominator-model, the CD-model. This model views P as a common denominator rather than a rival to M and S. The victory of M or S is not now thought of as the defeat of P, for P is now regarded as a frame within which M and S can be embedded. The CD-model is presupposed by Parfit when he claims that there is one possible form of P that coincides with S (p. 131) and one that includes M (p. 133).

I shall trace these two models to an ambiguity in P: it can be stated either as a ground-level or as a meta-level thesis, and these are correlated with the CD-model and the R-model, respectively. As soon as these two formulations of P are distinguished, it is clear that the ground-level variant is by far the most plausible one.

Unearthing this ambiguity of P will also lead to the separation of two components of the temporal neutrality of S: temporal dissociation and temporal universality (or generality). Without explicitly distinguishing between them Parfit raises objections to both.

Corresponding to this division in the realm of temporal neutrality, one can split personal neutrality into personal dissociation and universality. I believe that Parfit’s celebrated reductive account of personal identity supports a rational requirement of personal universality, but not of ditto dissociation.

Consequently, if Parfit declines to require temporal universality as well, his position will be vulnerable to an objection he launches against S: it will be incompletely relative. This tempts one to conclude, at least tentatively, that rational desires must have a basis that is universal in both ways.

In contrast, a rational being need not be dissociated, temporally or personally, though it may be. Another rational alternative is to have what I term ideals. Since it is thus not unreasonable to think that universality has a more secure foothold in rationality than dissociation has, it is essential to keep apart these two elements of neutrality.

II. The Rationale of the CD-Model

I shall begin by stating the rationale of the CD-model. If the term “desire” is broadly construed, it is analytically true that if a subject acts for a reason –