

Ingmar Persson, *The Retreat of Reason: A Dilemma in the Philosophy of Life*

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Analytic philosophers are often accused of ignoring the large questions that philosophy should be about and of concentrating instead on small technical questions that no one else is interested in. This accusation is not entirely unfounded. However, in order to answer large philosophical questions, we often need to answer many smaller and more technical ones first, whether or not anyone is interested in the answers to them. In his excellent new book *The Retreat of Reason: A Dilemma in the Philosophy of Life*, the Swedish philosopher Ingmar Persson does exactly that. The large philosophical question Persson tries to answer is: how should we lead our lives? His answer emerges slowly, via a large number of smaller and more technical questions. But Persson always does his best to explain how his answers to the smaller questions contribute to his answer to the large one, and anyone who makes the effort to read this book is likely to be rewarded with many new insights.

According to Persson, how we should lead our lives depends on what our overall aim in life is. He argues that we are rationally permitted to have two different kinds of aim: a cognitively rationalist aim, according to which we should try to lead our lives in accordance with true beliefs about the world, and a satisfactionalist aim, according to which we should try to lead lives that are as fulfilling as possible. Of course, it would be nice if we could live in accordance with both of these aims, but Persson thinks we cannot: he argues that there is a deep conflict between the cognitively rationalist aim and the satisfactionalist aim, and that we can only live in accordance with one of these aims if we do not live in accordance with the other.

The conflict between these two aims manifests itself, Persson thinks, when we try to answer three smaller philosophical questions. The first is whether we should be temporally neutral: that is, whether we should value similar experiences equally whether they have occurred in the past or will occur in the future and whether they will occur in the near future or in the distant future. It seems clear that human beings are not temporally neutral in this sense: for example, if we were given a choice between discovering that we had a good experience in the past that we had temporarily forgotten about or discovering that we are going to have a slightly less good experience in the future, almost all of us would prefer to discover that we are going to have the slightly less good experience in the future. Persson argues that there is no difference between experiences that occur at different times that could justify this choice, and that cognitive rationality therefore requires us to be temporally neutral. But he also argues that being temporally neutral would make us realize how insignificant our lives are in comparison to everything that has happened in the past and everything that will happen the future, and that this would make our lives much less fulfilling than they would otherwise be. Therefore, he concludes, whereas the cognitively rationalist aim requires us to be temporally neutral, the satisfactionalist aim requires us not to be temporally neutral.

The second question is whether we should be personally neutral: that is, whether we

should value all experiences equally whether they are our own experiences or someone else's experiences. Again, it seems clear that human beings are not personally neutral in this sense: if we faced a choice between giving a good experience to ourselves or a slightly better experience to an equally deserving stranger, almost all of us would choose to give the good experience to ourselves. Persson argues that there are no facts about what makes us the persons we are and what makes us distinct from other persons that could justify this choice, and that cognitive rationality therefore requires us to be personally neutral. But he then goes on to argue that being personally neutral is so difficult that, if we tried to be personally neutral, our lives would be much less fulfilling than they would otherwise be. Again, therefore, he concludes that while the cognitively rationalist aim requires us to be personally neutral, the satisfactionalist aim requires the opposite.

The third question is whether we should hold others responsible for what they do: that is, whether we should praise other people for what we think they have done right and blame them for what we think they have done wrong. Persson argues that we are partly justified in doing this, since by praising or blaming other people we can influence what they will do in the future. But he thinks that our idea of responsibility involves the idea of desert: that is, when we praise or blame someone, we take this person to deserve the praise or blame that they get. This idea of desert, Persson argues, presupposes that people are ultimately responsible for their own characters in a way they cannot be, and cognitive rationality therefore requires that we stop holding others responsible in a way that involves desert. But he also argues that we could only stop holding other people responsible in this way if we gave up many emotions towards others that are central to our lives, and that giving up these emotions is so difficult that trying to give them up would make our lives much less fulfilling than they would otherwise be. His conclusion is therefore, once again, that the cognitively rationalist aim requires that we stop holding others responsible in this sense, but that the satisfactionalist aim requires that we continue to do so.

If Persson is right, then, there are two incompatible answers to his central question: we can live in accordance with the cognitively rationalist aim or in accordance with the satisfactionalist aim, but we cannot live in accordance with both – that is, we cannot lead lives that are both in accordance with true beliefs about the world and that are also as fulfilling as possible. Of course, it would have been much nicer if we could have done this. But Persson does not draw this conclusion because he thinks it is nice: rather, he draws it because it emerges out of his answers to the large number of smaller and more technical questions he discusses. Even if Persson's conclusion is not very nice, *The Retreat of Reason* makes a very good case for thinking that it is true.