



## What's It All About?

*What's it all about? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*

Julian Baggini

Granta, London, 2005

Julian Baggini is an important new voice for twenty-first century humanism. He has a skill which should be more highly prized than it is: the ability to write with clarity and brevity. And he has resisted being swallowed up in the academic ghetto, making it his task to bring philosophy out into the public forum. Along with Jeremy Stangroom, Baggini edits *The Philosopher's Magazine*, one of the few commercially viable magazines of philosophy operating.

As well as his journalistic work, Baggini has edited or written a number of books, which also manage to be short, clear, accessible to non-specialists and authoritative, without being condescending, all at the same time. His latest book, *What's it all about?* is an attempt to answer what for many is the holy grail of philosophical questions: the meaning of life.

Baggini describes his approach as rationalist-humanist: 'rationalist in the sense that it is guided by reasoned argument and not by intuition, revelation, appeals to authority or superstition. It is humanistic in that it claims human life contains the source and measure of its own value.' (p 174) This book stands in the tradition of good short, non-specialist works by humanist thinkers; books like *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930) by Bertrand Russell, *What are we to do with our lives?* (1931) by H. G. Wells, *Ethics for Unbelievers* (1948) by Amber Blanco White, *How are we to live?* (1993) by Peter Singer and *The Courage to Become* (1997) by Paul Kurtz. More than these books, Baggini balances commentary on mainstream philosophers with references to films, popular culture, and other examples of what gets called real life.

Each chapter deals methodically with one of the main approaches to the question of life's meaning. Searching for meaning by going back to root causes, to origins, is examined, and found wanting. So is projecting meaning into the future. Faith is shown to be risky as well as faulty. These are all relatively well-worn paths. Where Baggini embarks on newer territory is when he examines notions such as finding meaning in service to others. The apparently uncomplicated goodness of that ideal is shown to be built on sand. Other ideas, often expressed, like "it doesn't matter, so long as you're happy," or "to hell with the questions, just live for the day," are also exposed to scrutiny.

Baggini resists two temptations which often mar the pop-psychology type of self-help book. He offers no list of commandments or maxims for the prosecution of a better life. All that can properly be given is a framework rather than a complete instruction manual. Neither does he contrive some dramatic breakthrough to a new level of understanding. He reminds us, wisely,

that if there was a single, big secret to the meaning of life, we would probably have heard about it by now. (pp 2-3) What we get is a sensible, entertaining and sound discussion of most of the arguments for this or that view of the meaning of life. The spirit of this book is best exemplified when he says that it 'does not require a belief in God to feel thankful to be alive or to appreciate that not everything in life is for us to determine.' (p 180) What's it all about? is well worth reading.

***Bill Cooke***