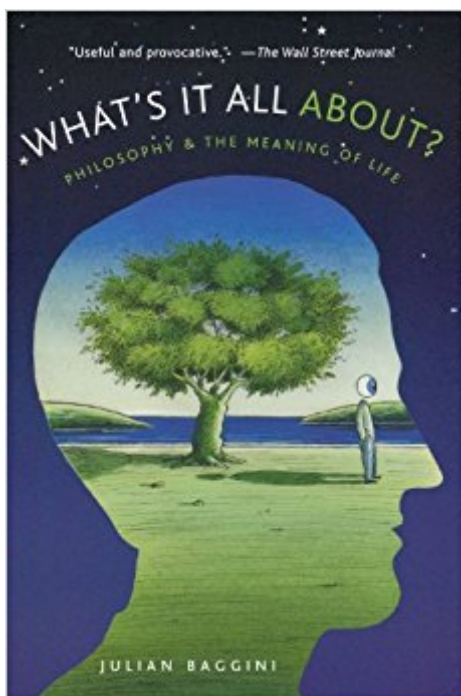


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# What's It All About?: Philosophy And The Meaning Of Life



## Synopsis

What is the meaning of life? It is a question that has intrigued the great philosophers--and has been hilariously lampooned by Monty Python. Indeed, the whole idea strikes many of us as vaguely pompous and perhaps more than a little absurd. Is there one profound answer, an ultimate purpose behind human existence? Julian Baggini thinks not. Rather, as Baggini argues in *What's It All About*, meaning can be found in a variety of ways. He succinctly breaks down six answers people commonly suggest when considering what life is all about--helping others, serving humanity, being happy, becoming successful, enjoying each day as if it were your last, and "freeing your mind." By reducing the vague, mysterious question of "meaning" to a series of more specific (if unmysterious) questions about what gives life purpose and value, he shows that the quest for meaning can be personal, empowering, and uplifting. Illustrating his argument with the thoughts of many of the great philosophers and examples drawn from everyday life, Baggini convincingly shows that the search for meaning is personal and within the power of each of us to find.

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## Customer Reviews

In tackling the meaning of life, Baggini (*Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*) demonstrates the debate's long and knotty history. Drawing on a wide array of attempts to formulate a theory about life's purpose, he builds a sturdy case for a "framework" readers can use in contemplating the question the title poses. Baggini covers a lot of ground despite the book's slimness: the arguments of thinkers from Aristotle to Nietzsche are successfully distilled, and he usually provides a nuanced discussion of all sides. The book is divided into chapters that consider the merits of six theories

about life's meaning, and while Baggini pokes holes in all of them, he also takes elements from each, such as "make every day count" from the section on the carpe diem outlook, to use in his own approach. This structure, as well as his conversational prose, which is peppered with pop culture references to Ozzy Osbourne and the movie *Antz*, make for easy digestion. Because of the short format, Baggini has to be selective about what he addresses; he ignores or quickly dispatches many theories, beginning with anything religious, so a large number of readers will immediately reject his reasoning. However, secular-minded readers seeking an alternative to *The Purpose-Driven Life* have an excellent starting point here. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Nearly everyone has at some time wondered why we are here, what the purpose of life is. Julian Baggini's *What's It All About?* begins with these ruminations but shifts to the intimately related question of what makes life valuable and meaningful. Baggini, founding editor of the *Philosopher's Magazine*, makes the rationalist-humanist assumption that reason and evidence are to be employed in the attempt to understand why we are here. He then proceeds to argue that inquiry into human origins and future human prospects does not reveal a purpose for human existence. Most confrontational to readers may be his skepticism about a God giving purpose to life. Is it plausible, he asks, to suppose that we are here to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28)? Why do we need to do this? And why would an all-powerful God create us to have us serve or worship him? Doesn't that suggest that God is an egotistical tyrant? The conclusion that life lacks a "higher" purpose is often accompanied by great angst. Without such an overarching direction, life seems worthless. Baggini, however, challenges this view and provides some rough guidelines about what in fact makes life valuable to people. Helping others can give life meaning, insofar as it makes for an uplifted quality of life. Happiness, construed as something other than mere immediate sensual pleasure, is also a good thing. Success in parenting, in one's profession and in leading a morally decent existence can give life direction, too. There is much to recommend Baggini's book. It is clearly written and reasoned, setting out the sober view that life can be meaningful even if purposeless. The principal shortcomings are those imposed by the genre of popular philosophy; the reader is likely to find that his or her particular views are not given the full attention they deserve. Nor are the author's positive views worked out in much detail. What this means, of course, is that *What's It All About?* is only a starting point for reflection. Ken Aizawa --This text refers to an

out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Overall I liked the book very much especially since it was my first on my Kindle! I'm often preoccupied with what life is all about and I was very excited when I found something accessible and comprehensive from a professional philosopher with a 360 degree view on the issue. I found the first few chapters very satisfying but as the book went on, I sometimes struggled to keep up with the author and sometimes a little bored (the chapter on Carpe Diem is kind of boring). One of the problems with the author's style is that he's slightly repetitive. Once you struggle through a paragraph, often the next one reiterates the same idea, and takes just as much time to understand. Again, the section on Carpe Diem is a good example. I would love this book to be a bit less wordy. The conclusion that meaning of life could be found in finding a satisfying activity that will last a lifetime is just OK. It could work for a lot of people but many others would still be left overboard. True, just because not everybody can be happy doesn't mean that the author's conclusion is wrong, but I would have enjoyed the book much more if I saw some acknowledgment that life can really, well, suck and there could be nothing we could do about it. That would make the discussion more honest. One just needs to think about the great number of those sick, oppressed, tortured (right this moment), deeply depressed, unjustly imprisoned, etc. Their suffering might be too all-consuming to think about anything but putting an end to it. Can they find a meaning to their lives? I think it would be more honest if we said that there is a tremendous degree of chance and luck involved in our ability to make our lives bearable. We might know the recipe for a good life but our brain constitution could be such that implementing the plan would be anatomically/neurologically impossible. Even if some of us do find a way to get enjoyment out of our lives, it hardly has any significance after our death, because that enjoyment (or any other emotion for that matter) doesn't transcend our being. Death erases all signs of our lives as Marcus Aurelius kept telling himself in his "Meditations". Our feeling of enjoyment is just a function of our brain (made possible by our dopamine based reward system) and so just another animalistic function that stops working the minute we are dead. How we felt during our lives has zero significance. Except our brains make us feel better when we do something that they think is good for us. A hard question for me is: if it doesn't matter how we feel during our lives, why not just enjoy our lives since it feels better (i.e. generates dopamine)? It sure is an enticing proposition but strangely enough, hurting gives its own pleasure. In the end, happy or unhappy doesn't change anything after our death and in that sense Camus' question "Why not commit suicide?" still stands -- at least for those whose suffering is hard to bear. In my opinion, the best take on life, its meaning or lack thereof was given by Schopenhauer despite all the criticism

his philosophy has received. Yes, his philosophy is pessimistic, but just because it is pessimistic doesn't make it wrong.

Julian has a really interesting perspective on the meaning of life. Love is rarely written about in Philosophy literature.

This is a good book for a reader who is not an expert of philosophy. One hears a lot of answers/maxims/directives/mottos when one asks about life's purpose. And on the surface a lot of these answers sound logical. Baggini digs deeper behind these answers and analyzes in what ways a particular motto/directive makes sense and in what ways it does not. Baggini stresses the point that a lot of the simple mottos that are thrown around e.g "seize the day", "always strive towards your goals", "just try to be happy", "helping others is the greatest virtue" could mean different things to different people. And some of the inferences that could be drawn from these mottos just do not make sense. Hence one should be careful about latching on to catch phrases like these without fully understanding what it entails. Baggini does not pre-suppose any deep philosophical knowledge on the part of the readers. So, he explains any philosophical concepts that he brings up. In this way, the book is also a good introduction to philosophy. As other reviewers and even Baggini himself have mentioned, Baggini provides no clearcut prescription but a framework which can be used to live a meaningful and purposeful life. Baggini discusses and identifies a number of components of the purposeful life, but it is up to the readers to work out the specifics and to bring it to fruition. I find this approach very hopeful and motivating although I can understand that it can also feel daunting. For someone who is already well versed in philosophy, this book might not be a satisfying read. Baggini does not spend more than a couple of pages (small pages and large print!) on any of the philosophical concepts/theories that he introduces. But for the layperson looking to read her first book on the meaning/purpose of life, this book is great.

Must read, for those who ever wonder why we are all here people on Earth for. Given, Baggini is a fluent philosopher in both modern and old ages, taken modern science into account, provides elegant and trustworthy view on these matter, something, even scientists from unrelated field would benefit from. Well complimented with his "The Ego Trick".

Julian Baggini begins with a blast, but ends a little lackluster. The first-two chapters examine what if, or why should, the existence/non-existence of God make a difference into determining the meaning

of life. The remaining chapters evaluate "other" claims some people often make as to what they find "meaningful" in their lives. The "bottom line" is that living itself, for its own sake, is what truly the only thing that gives life meaning, and that all the other ascriptions are, at best, some of the reasons that build into "life lived." I'm not the least bit surprised that a modern analytic philosophy like Baggini ultimately finds refuge in the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, because only existentialism has asked the "big" questions that philosophy is suppose to answer in the past 800 years. There are many excellent works that make Sartre more accessible than his horrid "Being and Nothingness," with "Existentialism and Humanism" topping the list. Robert Solomon is another modern analytic philosopher drawn to the existentialist mode, and his readings always produce excellent fruit. If one wants a quick discounting of all the traditional answers given to the question, this book fills that need. But for a more evaluative understanding, seek either Sartre or Solomon. Overall, a good read, but the tedium starts to gestate after the fifth chapter.

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