

PHILOSOPHY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE, by Karl Britton. *Cambridge University Press*, 1968. 218 pp. Cloth 40s., paperback 12s.

It is unusual to find an English philosopher writing about the meaning of life. Professor Britton does so in recognition of the fact that many people come to the study of philosophy by questioning the meaning of life and he hopes that by discussing some of these questions and their possible answers they might be introduced to the tools of contemporary philosophy.

Professor Britton discusses two questions:

Why does the universe exist?

Do I exist for some purpose, and if so, how am I to discover it? Traditional religious answers to both questions are examined in Chapter 2 and, in a more critical manner, in the final chapter. But it is in Chapters 3, 4 and 8 that Professor Britton provides a more typical example of how English philosophy tackles other possible answers to these questions.

In Chapter 3 he examines the idea that knowing, understanding and contemplating the truth gives the final point to life. The Rationalist case is vulnerable because it is incapable of dealing with practical questions of what I should do and although knowledge of a rule of action may provide us with some reason for acting, it does not provide us with a final and sufficient reason. In answering the Empiricist view that knowledge, although very limited, is worthwhile for its own sake, Professor Britton says that knowing by itself is incomplete for it avoids practical decisions which are of great importance. Thus it is an insufficient answer and also one that does not compel assent.

Some people find the meaning of their lives in work or their family or belonging to an institution or helping others. Professor Britton discusses these answers in Chapter 4. Although they may be necessary for some people if life is to have meaning, they are not a sufficient definition of the meaning of life because they need not cover everyone. This list could be extended indefinitely and we could work our way through it and show that each answer was either unnecessary or insufficient for there

could always be people beyond its scope. We must, therefore, expect a very different kind of answer to our fundamental questions.

Before continuing this discussion into the meaning of life, Professor Britton dismisses the view that the meaning of the universe is to be found in terms of final causality (Chapter 5). In Chapter 6 he deals with the logical aspects of personal identity and in Chapter 7 he concludes that any answer to the meaning of life must both assert a view of the facts and affirm some principles of conduct.

In Chapter 8 he says that life only has meaning if the following facts hold:

A man may be guided by his own convictions.

The life of a person matters in itself because it may matter to him and it may matter to other people.

The relationships between persons matter in themselves and many are of value in themselves.

A person may detect and accept a particular pattern in his own life. On Professor Britton's own admission these conclusions are pretty thin. This is necessarily so because he is only laying down conditions which have to be satisfied if life is to have any meaning. He is not attempting to say what that meaning is, for he has already shown that any answer offered can be shown to be inadequate. However, I am sure that something of greater worth could have been achieved had he spent more time on the theory of meaning itself. He only deals with this topic briefly whilst discussing his first condition, but even in that brief passage (p. 182) one is aware that what is being affirmed is of greater importance than all the rest.

There is no doubt that the newcomer to philosophy will learn from Professor Britton some of the tools of contemporary English philosophy. But it is doubtful if he will judge them, on this showing, to have very much to offer on questions concerned with the meaning of life.

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