

BOOK REVIEWS

What's It All About?

A guide to life's basic questions and answers

Richard de la Chaumiere. (2004). London: Wisdom House Press.

The stated aim of this book is to enlighten and encourage its readers to embark upon a personal quest for their own version of the ultimate truth; to equip the reader with the tools and skills necessary to become an effective 'truth seeker'. A grand aim and, correspondingly, the book has a grand scope. Sections sweep from an initial categorisation of vernacular understandings of life's basic questions and dilemmas, based upon a series of interviews conducted by the author with a variety of respondents, to discussing the worldviews of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In between these points there is also an account of the historical factors which have shaped the possibilities of discovering the meaning of life, a brief history of the development of epistemology, a novel classification of the personality types of truth seekers, and an overview of some current issues in physics, cosmology and evolutionary biology. It is a breathless journey to make in under 400 pages, and while sections of the book are undoubtedly interesting, somewhat incongruously, the particular purpose of each of the sections was not always apparent.

Through much of the book, the author takes a neutral stance on the varieties of beliefs being considered. Indeed, at times there is an overwhelming inclusiveness that can be quite unsettling, with an unusual style that is careful not to alienate anyone's beliefs. But this style reveals more than just a benign pluralism, it means much of the consideration of the wide range of issues is a theoretical. So it is a breathless journey on which the reader is rarely clear where he is going or why he is going there. In part the necessarily brief accounts of all these different fields preclude the possibility of taking any kind of critical stance, such as outlining the integrative possibilities of where apparently competing ideas might overlap or contradict each other. In fact the lack of criticism throughout the book appears to derive from an immense awe of existence, the means by which we come to know it, the ways in which we may study it and, indeed, the fact that we exist at all. Indeed, the latter sections of the book become an uncritical and unreflecting hymn to how wonderful all of humanity is:

Humankind is a unique flowering of nature on the planet. Our special significance is defined not by our animality but by our humanity

(p. 304).

Considering more specific issues, the presentation of the development of

Western philosophy is set within the emergence of scientific inquiry, beginning with an account of Milesian inquiries into nature. Thereafter, a perspective on the development of scientific thought is outlined up until the eighteenth century, when the account suddenly stops with Kant. Clearly the aim is to set up an empiricist basis for the later explanations of contemporary science, but one in which the limits of what we can empirically know are partly addressed. However, in this sudden truncation of the development of philosophical thought, the more pertinent philosophy offered by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein is left unexplored and the account is therefore weaker as a result of it. While some of the issues about the limits of what we can know with certainty are outlined, by coming to a sudden stop in the 18th century the issues facing today's reflective 'truth-seeker' are ignored. Therefore, the book implies that for the student truth-seeker language is transparent and that there is little barrier to knowing and reflecting upon our feelings or motivations; things are pretty much as they seem, albeit with the exception of a brief nod towards the noumenal-phenomenal distinction, but this distinction is then ignored for the remainder of the book. This offers the truth-seeker a simplified stance towards assessing different forms of knowledge.

As for much of the book, the account of the development of epistemology draws largely upon secondary sources, and the reader is left to trust the authority of the selected expert opinion. The sources are presumably chosen to support an argument, but one that is typically hidden to avoid compromising the ostensibly non-judgemental stance. The author is a psychologist and it is a particular shame then that, given the opportunity to discuss familiar primary sources, the psychological sections seem so weak, with glib characterisations and a lack of convincing evidence to support the assertions. It may be that the author has found the distinctions between different types of truth-seeker to be clinically useful in some way, but this is not clear. It appears that the list of twelve types of truth seeker are proposed to stand shoulder to shoulder with quantum physics and the history of epistemology. Indeed, the discussion of the scientific perspectives may be a particular strength of the book, and while there are dedicated books which deal with the existential aspects of cosmology and quantum physics more specifically, it is likely that few of them will be quite so easy to access. However, the accessibility of these scientific accounts implies a simplification that requires some degree of caution as, again, the reader is being covertly led to a celebration of humanity's splendour.

Overall, this is in many ways a worthy and well-intended book, in so far as it seeks to encourage its readers to seek their own form of truth beyond the limits of our cultural knowledge, but in so doing, it only presents a partial account of the alternatives. It presents snippets of interesting

information but fails to integrate them into an organised perspective. For example, it may be that if the reader knows very little about recent scientific advances they might learn something from it. But if they then wish to use this to engage with the contemporary existential issues and take these forward into an analysis of life's basic questions and answers, they would be sorely disappointed.

Despite the carefully non-judgemental stance, this is an intensely personal book. It strives to present an unbiased argument for justifying a diversity of beliefs, but this project is compromised by the lack of transparency in selecting the arguments and, specifically, the unwillingness to own up to the standpoints that have guided the very selective and idiosyncratic shaping of the book. Not at all for readers with an established background in philosophy and, sadly, unlikely to be of any direct use to our clients. Rather, I might suggest, the aim is to educate and inspire undergraduate readers who have managed to avoid intellectual engagement with much of philosophy, history or science.

Dr. Matt Woolgar

Seeking Safety

A Treatment Manual for PTSD and Substance Abuse

Lisa M. Najavits. (2001). New York: Guilford Publications

The future depends on what we do in the present.

(Gandhi)

This book is a treatment manual for therapists working with clients who suffer from both post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse. It begins with an overview of the literature on this subject, discussing the prevalence of the disorder, what the treatment outcomes are and argues for an integrated therapy that treats PTSD and substance abuse conjointly.

Chapter one explores the philosophy behind the treatment of PTSD and substance abuse and highlights cognitive behavioural therapy as the basis of effective treatment. In examining the self-destructive behaviours and risks associated with the two disorders, Najavits argues that problem orientation and the reduction of current symptoms meets the need of the first stage of this treatment; seeking safety. Interpersonal and case management domains are also added to treatment in order to help patients explore relationship dynamics that re-evoked trauma and substance abuse and to aid patients in accessing services in order to receive the support that they need. Material is related to patients' lives, along with an emphasis on practical solutions, such as safe coping strategies. The treatment also