Chapter One

Where Can I Find Answers?

Just before she died she asked, 'What is the answer?' No answer came. She laughed and said, 'In that case, what is the question?' Then she died.
(The last words of Gertrude Stein)

In the middle of nowhere two men, looking like tramps, are waiting for something to happen. They need to make sense of their lives. It isn't easy. One of them considers suicide, but then thinks better of it. The other sums up their lot – a painful birth, a painful death, with little of consequence in between. They're half-expecting someone. If he comes – if he exists – he might put things into place, give their lives some shape. Another man does come along with a boy. They stay a while, then they leave. Later they return, and then leave again. But he wasn't the one they half-expected. And, this apart, nothing happens.

These characters in *Waiting for Godot* reveal familiar concerns. What matters? How are we to live our lives? What are we to hope for? Can God and religion help? Is it bad that it will end? Many of us share these concerns, and, even if not relentlessly, ask ourselves such questions. And just such questions are asked in this book. They can seem straightforward. Yet they're not at all easy to answer. Beckett's characters get nowhere with them, and nor, for much of the time, do we. Why is this? It's going to be useful to think more about the sorts of questions asked here, see what makes them difficult, and consider what, if anything, holds them together.

They share a common theme. They're all, and obviously, questions about life and death. And, both for Beckett in his plays, and for me in the chapters that follow, they are about human life and human death. They deal with the basics of our existence, the span of our days and what, if anything, lies beyond. It's not surprising, then, that these are questions that concern us all.

And then they share an approach to that theme. They're all philosophical questions. That, too, might be obvious, either from where you found the book, or from skimming through it, or from looking at the cover. Even so, it might not be obvious what philosophy is. How does it connect with the apparently straightforward questions here? And what sorts of answers, if any, can it hope to offer?

Philosophy

But we can start with what it isn't. Philosophy isn't a science. It doesn't ask a lot of difficult factual questions, ones that need laboratories, big grants, teams of researchers to answer them. And because it doesn't ask such questions, doesn't in this way depend on and go after the facts, philosophy is unlike classics, black studies, law, and a host of further subjects besides. Like science, these also require a lot of real-world information, poking around in libraries and archives, devising experiments, surveys, and questionnaires. Of course, there are, as well, many scientific and quasi-scientific questions about life and death. It isn't just the topics that put us in the business of philosophy. So we might ask, for example, how does a living thing develop? How many died during the 1665 plague? What's the Buddhist angle on the sanctity of life? And what do Americans believe about heaven? These questions, all factual, are different in kind from the ones asked here.

There's another thing that philosophy isn't. It isn't narrow, unified, easily categorized. Its reputation is better than it was, but a lot of people still think of it as abstruse and high-flown – given to questions that have little or no bearing on everyday life: What is truth? Are we all dreaming? How is mathematics possible? Certainly, large parts of philosophy are like this, and anyone looking at a shelf in a university bookshop or at the contents pages of most academic journals will find much that's baffling, technical and inbred. A lot of philosophy does indeed deal with questions of metaphysics, and the fundamental nature of reality, and a lot more is centred on epistemology, and with what we can know of things, fundamental or not. Even so, there's a good deal that has a more straightforward connection with our lives, and tackles important and familiar issues of everyday concern. So questions about the rights and wrongs of abortion, war, or capital punishment, about whether we ought to give aid to the victims of famine and drought, whether the environment, or art, matters beyond its usefulness to us, whether animals have rights, all figure in an

increasing number of philosophy books and courses. There's the surprisingly long-running radio programme, *The Moral Maze*, which picks up on some dilemma of the week, and then subjects its victims to a barrage of questions about where they stand on the matter. There are columns in newspapers, subplots in novels and films, topics in a range of school exams. And there are discussions of such issues in cafés and bars everywhere. So it has its theoretical and practical sides, its history and its present, its scholars and its practitioners. It shouldn't be surprising that it's in this way wide-ranging. Just as there's a lot of variety in science, and literature, and art, so too for philosophy.

And it isn't narrow, isn't unified, in a further way. Even while agreeing that it's not a science, people nevertheless disagree about how best to approach it. Look for philosophy in a bookshop or on the internet and you'll find, as well as works by Plato, Kant and Wittgenstein, material connected with mysticism, Eastern religion, crystals, and lifestyle issues. Some people think of philosophy as involving trances, mantras, drugs and still other ways to attain a higher reality, a state where all is one. Others, in contrast, see it as hung up on reason, logic and analysis, quibbling about the meaning of words, insisting that we always first define our terms. Both approaches are at, or near to the extremes. Even so, what connects them, and connects them as well with the middle ground, is the idea that philosophy has a lot to do with understanding, and perhaps even benefiting from understanding, some difficult topics. There might be disagreement about how this understanding is to be achieved, but certainly it's this, or wisdom, clarity, or enlightenment that is, as ever, at philosophy's core.

About This Book

Though philosophy is a big subject, with many different parts, its scale is not reflected in this book. And though it can be tackled in a number of different ways, there is little of that variety here. There is just the one set of questions – some basic issues about life and death. And there is just one approach taken to answering them – reason and argument. But I'll say some more about both these points.

First, the range. I mentioned some of the more familiar philosophical questions above. But besides those questions – about abortion, punishment, rights, and so on – there are others, more fundamental, about what matters to us, what's of value. And it's on the basis of answers to, and

beliefs about, these further questions that many of our judgements regarding morality are based. Yet while the moral questions are often openly debated, these underlying beliefs tend to be taken for granted. Just two examples. We can spend a lot of time arguing about the rights and wrongs of capital punishment. But it's typically going to be assumed throughout that it's a good thing to live, and a bad thing to die. It's largely because of these beliefs that taking someone's life seems such a big issue. Or we wonder how God, if there is a God, could justify a system in which some of us suffer eternal damnation, while others enjoy paradise forever. And the assumption, often, is that whether or not it actually exists, heaven would surely be a good thing. Believe that, and getting there becomes important. So in both these cases the questions about morality – about what we should do to each other, or about what God should do to us – rest upon these underlying beliefs, first, about the value of life, second about the value of heaven. And in both cases the moral debate might well take a different turn once these underlying value assumptions begin to be explored.

Many of the questions in this book deal with these matters of value. Those that don't are closely connected with such matters. So rather than rehearse the relatively familiar questions about morality – and there are lots of books that do just this – I'm looking here at what lies beneath. And if questions of morality are important, then these underpinning questions are more important still. What I want to do, then, is focus on just a small number of issues that concern us all, and that in one way or another, acknowledged or not, help shape almost everything we do. The questions here come from different directions – from religion, medicine, population theory, puzzles about identity – but they all point to just a pair of closely connected themes – the good life, and the good life for me. Closely connected obviously, but nevertheless distinct. For not only do I want to know what makes a life worth living, gives it meaning and significance, I want to know as well whether this worthwhile life is one that I should care about, whether it will in fact be a life that I might hope to live.

Second, the approach. You shouldn't get the wrong idea about how pure it is. I don't want to promote the caricature of the philosopher as some kind of ivory-towered, egg-headed calculating machine, a tweedy version of Mr Spock. The emphasis is on reason, but not to the exclusion of all else. And though there's an abiding concern to make things clear, there's no corresponding concern to pepper the whole thing with definitions, dotting all the 'i's', crossing every 't'. For if the question isn't overly

technical, nor, I think, should be the approach to answering it. And with questions about life, death and meaning, attempts at too much precision can only mislead. There's a related point here. Given such questions, then facts about our lives, and our views and beliefs about them, are needed for answers. This is another reason the ivory tower philosopher can't get things right. Why? Because to answer these questions you do need some understanding of human nature, some grasp of what makes us tick. One way to acquire such understanding is to think about your own life, and the lives of people you know. Another is find out something of just how people have ticked in the past, and elsewhere, either by looking at history, or at biography, or at novels, plays, poems and films. Don't think I'm going back on an earlier point. I'm not now saying that we need to dig about, collect lots of facts. It's often little more than a fairly basic knowledge, a general understanding, that is needed here. And such knowledge can be picked up or borrowed from elsewhere, with the philosopher relying on others to provide the right sort of information, rather than investigating these matters afresh.

I can say something else about this book. I ask the questions. I do some philosophy. And then I offer some answers. Yet there'll be people who are suspicious about this entire procedure. Factual questions have answers. Others don't. That's one suspicion. It all sounds preachy and dogmatic. That's another. Are these suspicions well founded? Hardly surprising, but I don't think so.

A Case Study

He spends most of his time in the market place, in Athens, trying to draw people into conversation. Not just anybody – bigwigs, generals, politicians, aristocrats, so-called philosophers, and young men who think of themselves as the bigwigs of the future. And not just any conversation – Socrates is concerned, much as I am here, first with questions of value, with what makes life worth living, and, second with questions about these questions – what are they like?, why are they tricky?, where are the answers? His tactic, usually, is to feign ignorance, catch his targets off guard, flatter them, and then get them to make fools of themselves. They hate him for it. And in the end it costs him his life.

Why, though, bother with these conversations? Why make all this fuss? There are two views that Socrates opposes, and that he wants to show are wrong. First, there's the view that just because of their status, these

people have any special authority in these matters. It's one thing to think a general can successfully command an army in the field, or that a lawyer can get his client off some embezzlement charge, and another to suppose that either has any particular weight in the wider moral and value questions. Second, there's the view, seemingly at odds with the first, that there are just no experts, no authorities, in such matters, and that everyone's opinion is as good as the next person's. Think this, and you'll probably think that whenever disputes of this sort arise, the best and fairest way to resolve them is simply to put things to a vote. There might seem to be real difficulties in threading a way through these positions – rejecting both traditional authority, on the one hand, and a free-for-all populism, on the other – but Socrates manages it. He keeps on insisting that just as there's a need for experts in, say, pot-making, horse-training, or flute-playing, so too there's a similar need where the good life is concerned. It's important to have well-made pots about the house, and so it's important to seek out a proven expert before you buy. It's even more important to make a good job of living your life, and so even more important to get the best advice about how to do this, neither swallowing mere claptrap, nor blundering along on your own.

But then what's wrong with generals, lawyers and politicians? Why can't we learn from them? Well, it's just that once they're off their own patch, they rarely know what they're talking about. And this is where it matters that Socrates, like many of us today, lives in a kind of democracy, a society where it's always possible, in principle at least, to challenge authority, insist it explains itself. There's a disinclination, then as now, to show someone unqualified and unconditional respect, or to sit, obedient and uncomplaining, at the feet of a guru or master. And Socrates is particularly good at this kind of challenge, at taking the wind from the sails of these self-appointed experts, and proving, usually in front of a crowd of amused onlookers, that their so-called expertise is nothing more than a sham. Yet there's always a problem within a more open society, one that encourages supposedly healthy debate – it can be tempting, having knocked people off their pedestals, simply then to walk away, leaving a mess behind. And many of his contemporaries thought of Socrates as a merely destructive force, unpicking at their society's still delicate fabric with no thought of tomorrow. They had him wrong. Socrates cared about Athens, its citizens, and their somewhat fragile and unsettled state. He wanted to help put things right, to persuade people to think hard about the most basic issues facing them, and to find genuine experts in the art of living well. It wasn't going to be easy. Where to

look? He gives no straight answer to this question, nor does he offer himself as the fount of all wisdom. But what he does do is insist on a test for expertise. And it's reason. If someone's claims don't stand up to reason, if they don't square with each other, and with other things they say they know, if they're at odds with things beyond all reasonable doubt, then those claims can hardly be accepted. There is no blind authority. But there is authority nevertheless, derived from reason, from making sense, from withstanding criticism and robust questioning. Find the experts. Listen to what they have to say. But then their answers are going to stand or fall, in the end, on their own terms.

Experts and Expertise

On this point little has changed. And those suspicions still survive today. We think that either these questions can't really be answered, and all we can do is note different responses to them, with one person's opinion counting as much as the next. Or if there are answers, then they must be difficult to provide, depending on specialist knowledge and expertise, with everyday beliefs, and everyday objections, counting for little or nothing. So it's either anything goes, or there are authorities, and it's a kind of science, after all.

But now what's fallen between two stools here is the idea of a middle position, the idea that there's genuine progress to be made, genuinely better and worse views to be had, and yet that we're all able to contribute to this progress, and help distinguish between these views. Take just one question: should euthanasia be permitted? We don't have to think that there's no real point in asking this, and that one opinion is just as good as the next. Nor need we suppose that doctors, or lawyers, must know what's best here. We can have an intelligent debate, consider the pros and cons, chew things over, and come, in the end, to a well-supported view. Or another: should Muslims, or Catholics, or Jews, have their own schools? Again there are serious moral issues here, and though historians, educationalists, clerics will all have a big input the answer won't derive simply from their views alone. It's a matter of concern, and importance for us all.

So, is there philosophical expertise or not? Yes, but it's of a somewhat peculiar kind. Take history, medicine, geography. For most of us, and for most of the time, there's little option but to take what is said here on trust, believe in the specialists, accept their word. There are just too

many facts. And there is, in such areas, a fairly standard and familiar notion of expertise, knowledge-based, cumulative, and not readily open to outside appraisal. But now contrast this with, say, a grand master in chess. He's an expert in a different sense – it isn't that he knows a lot more about chess than the rest of us but rather that, partly through innate talent, and partly through hard work, he's just better at it. Even so, you can understand what he's doing, follow the moves, see how good he is. You don't have to take anything on trust. It's similar with maths – I read only today in the newspaper of a top mathematician who describes his job, not as collecting more information, but as taking the relatively little he has, and then sitting and thinking about it. And it's similar again, elsewhere, with tennis players, jazz pianists, actors. Their talent depends on skill and understanding, rather than knowledge. And it's transparent. We can see what they're up to, judge for ourselves how good they are, and rank them one against the other.

It's the same, more or less, with philosophers. They mix a taste for certain questions – often abstract, general, long-standing – with a range of skills – putting things clearly, analysing and constructing arguments, sticking with a relatively small point. But there isn't a vast fund of knowledge that the philosopher needs to draw on. And I say the same, more or less, because philosophical expertise isn't transparent in a way strictly analogous to tennis or chess. Sad but true, we're not all as reasonable as each other. And so we're not all equally able to assess the merits of some philosophical argument.

Who Needs Philosophy?

Yet even if there are things to think about, and questions to answer, is it really clear that we need philosophy in order to go about this? Think of other things – religion, schools, novels and plays, stories of great lives, even the influence of your own family. Don't we already find plenty there that deals with the art of living well? Why look further?

There's something to the point here, and no one's going to suggest that the questions in this book are the province of philosophy alone. Didn't I start, after all, with the gist of a well-known play? But it's one thing to raise questions, and another to provide answers. And it's often true that when answers come directly from these others sources, then they're less solid, less accurate, and less convincing than those that philosophy might provide. This isn't always a problem – the best thing

with children, often, is just to tell them what's right and wrong, what matters and what doesn't, rather than to reason with them, and talk everything through. And on the larger scale, Kant thought that for societies, too, there are periods when instruction is better than debate. But for us actively to take part in discussion of these issues is, individually and collectively, a better thing, and a symptom of greater maturity, than unquestioningly following the dictates of others. Even then there's perhaps no distinctive need for philosophy. For while some religions lay down the law, and insist on blind faith, others ask for reflection and criticism, and stress the guiding power of conscience. And while some novels, some films, sweep you along, breathless, on a tide of emotion, others encourage a certain distancing from character and plot, inviting you instead to think through the issues they raise. In schools and in homes there's a similar contrast, often related to age, with passive obedience giving way to more active and even-handed involvement in the matters to hand.

Yet in all these cases, rather than thinking it redundant, it's perhaps better to suppose that some proto-philosophical activity is already taking place. And surely this is right. For there isn't, of course, philosophy on the one hand, and the rest of culture on the other. There is, instead, a seamlessness, and differences of emphasis, with identifiable philosophical approaches and concerns emerging, by degrees, from a range of more familiar debates.

There's a bearing in all this on the claim, often made, that we're all philosophers. Is this true? On the one hand I've suggested that maybe we can all engage with some philosophical issue, while on the other I've allowed that some of us might be better at this than others. So, are we all philosophers, or is there just a happy few?

Well, almost everyone asks themselves, at some time or other, certain philosophical questions – can terrorism ever be justified? Is there a God? Might it all be a dream? We ask these questions as children, when we're drunk and maudlin, in response to events reported in the news. Of course, some of us ask such questions more often than others, but there's hardly anyone who shows no interest whatsoever. And then, inevitably, almost everyone tries to provide these questions with answers. Again, either because of some innate ability, or because of their training, or both, some spend longer, and are better at it than others. Even so, the differences between, first, good and bad philosophers and, second, philosophers and non-philosophers are in the end matters of degree, rather than of kind. It's the same with football, or music. Gordon can kick a ball around, run up and down the left wing, and if he's playing with friends

from work can even score the odd goal, but he's no Ronaldino. Is he a footballer? He says he is, and shows you his fancy footwork. Carrie plays piano and bass guitar, neither particularly well, but she's got a good sense of rhythm and knows when the singer's out of tune. Is she a musician? She denies it, pointing to her limited abilities, and the fact that she's passed no exams. And yet in both cases it's surely a waste of time to fuss about these labels. We might well know just how good a player he is, how useful she is in a band, without deciding whether some particular cap fits. So, similarly, we might say that, in one sense, everyone's a philosopher. But there are substantial differences in ability. And if someone wants to restrict the term to those who are good at it, or professionals, it won't much matter.

The Answers

So where are they? I've probably said enough already to make this clear. There are answers, of sorts, in the book itself. Each chapter, this included, sets out to address and reply to the question of its title. The answers are not always complete and might not always be satisfying. But they are as complete and as satisfying as I can, in this space, make them. So what I've tried to do is to put things clearly, presenting both what I think is the right view on the different topics – insisting, for example, that death is often bad, that there's no good reason to believe in an afterlife, that it needn't matter if the best people aren't born – and at the same time giving arguments in favour of that view, and reasons for supposing that it's right. And this is what the book is about – asking these philosophical questions about life and death, pulling the questions apart, moving towards answers, giving those answers their proper support. There are other things as well. I sometimes point out where a particular idea originated, or give the names of people who have held, or objected to, a certain view. And I sometimes refer to, and sometimes invent stories that illustrate a particular point, either to make it clearer or to show how philosophy is continuous with everyday concerns. But the emphasis throughout is on the questions and their answers, and most of such comment, such citing of facts, is peripheral.

It's important to notice, though, that the answers given here are in two senses less than authoritative. First, many philosophers will disagree with them. So people who've spent at least as long as I have in thinking and reading about these issues, people who've taught more courses, read

more books, and who are all round at least as able, will have different views, and be convinced that contrary answers are easily as good as those offered here. Think about how respectable scientists still argue about the big bang, or how historians are at loggerheads over the causes of the French Revolution. Second, and in contrast to these examples, I don't want to pull rank over any careful reader. You will agree with my answers, if you do, not because you take them on trust, but because, having thought things through, you are persuaded by the arguments. Mistakes – even if you think you couldn't have done better yourself – are going to be visible; like breaking the rules in chess, or over-hitting the top spin in tennis. For in an important sense, the authority for answers to such questions lies within each of us, and not somewhere beyond. Even so, it's hard, usually, to get very far on your own. And in a further important sense, what happens here is always a collaboration, with answers coming from a team – I make suggestions, you think about them, and form your own view.

Matters of Style

I might have adopted a different approach. Some writers would have tried to be even-handed, giving the best arguments on each side, balancing the pros against the cons, and leaving their own position, their own views, well hidden. And they might have thought that if the point is to encourage people to make up their own minds, to leave them free to decide, then that is the way to go. For surely it's inevitable that we are influenced by what we read, and so if some philosopher is free to present his own point of view with no contrary position rearing its head, then, many people, especially those relatively new to the subject, are going to be swayed by this. So if I'm honest in saying that I want you to come to a view of your own, then I would have adopted this dispassionate, stand-back, approach.

But it's worth being clear about this. For it's easy to run two things together – giving the best arguments on both sides, and being even-handed, balanced, uncommitted. Sometimes the truth is hard to discover, and then contrary arguments may well carry equal weight. But at other times there's pretty much an open and shut case, with the best arguments on one side clearly trouncing their rivals. It's hard to see, for example, how there could be worthwhile cases both for and against racism, or torturing animals, or for believing in fairies. And it's hard to see here

how a fence-sitting book, giving its readers supposedly balanced arguments, could be altogether honest. It might also be annoying. Ages back, the Greek philosopher Carneades was invited to Rome to show off his talents. The first day he argued, convincingly, that justice, at bottom, is altogether natural. The next day he was equally convincing in arguing that it's entirely a matter of convention. The Romans didn't know where they were, only that at least once they'd been conned, and Carneades had to leave town. So much for balance.

This still leaves, however, the further option: give the best arguments, however strong, and then step back and allow them to speak for themselves. Might that be preferred? It might, but I don't try to do that here. This isn't a textbook, and I'm not trying to be a teacher. I'm trying to answer the questions. So although I give objections to the views put forward, I make it clear that, at least in many cases, I think those objections can be defeated. And I find it neither easy nor interesting to avoid taking sides.

That's one point about style. There's another that needs to be mentioned. I'll be honest, this isn't the most exciting book you'll ever read. It might not even be the most exciting philosophy book. But if so, that's in part because, once again, I'm simply trying to answer the questions. But I should explain something.

There are two contrasting styles in philosophy – on the one hand are the system builders, intent, often, on a philosophy of everything, with the different parts fitting well together, and on the other are the sceptics and critics, much given to deconstructing, and finding fault with what the system builders think they've achieved. Often, of course, the system builders write the longer books. Go back to near the beginning, and there's the stark contrast between Socrates and Plato, with the earlier philosopher's unscripted conversations set against the latter's many tomes. And while Socrates was primarily a questioner, claiming, even if not always convincingly, to know nothing, Plato, at least for periods in his life, produced a coherent and well-structured whole. A similar contrast occurs in the eighteenth century, between the Scottish philosopher David Hume, and, in Germany, Immanuel Kant. Hume sets out his stall as a self-confessed sceptic, concerned, above all else, to show that the systems of his contemporaries and predecessors, though they promise much, invariably fail to deliver. They're impressive, elaborate and showy, but ambition gets the better of them, and they're too easily undermined. And it was precisely Hume's sceptical work that motivated Kant to develop, toward the end of his life, his three big books, once more putting an

ambitious and systematic philosophy firmly on the map. The contrast surfaces again in the following century. Though they're often linked together, Schopenhauer's philosophy of pessimism, erected on Kantian foundations, is an altogether larger and more structured work than the improvisatory, allusive and often inconsistent writings of Nietzsche. And Wittgenstein covered the angles here, first building a system but then later, after something of a holiday, knocking it down. I'm on the sceptical side. It isn't merely temperament, although that must be a part of it. More important, it seems to me that when it aims high, philosophy typically overreaches itself. Life is messy, as too is what we say and think about it, and systematic philosophy, looking for clean lines, elegance, precision, seems to do too little justice to this. It's more or less the same whenever theorizing about human activity gets carried away with itself – communism, monetarism and faddy diets are all less able to respond to the complexity of our interests and needs than more pragmatic and open-ended solutions. If you want to lose weight, eat less. And if you want a better life, think more. That's the gist of it. This doesn't, though, leave the more sceptical philosophy with nothing to do. It can puncture the pretensions of its overblown and high-flown rivals, on the one hand. And (not entirely separately) it can function as a corrective to everyday errors and confusions, on the other. And that's quite a lot. The upshot, then, is that many of the arguments given in this book are in important ways critical. I often find fault with more spectacular and heady views. And I suggest, often, that a murkier position is better. Further, in many cases the answers I favour are closer to common sense, and thus are already familiar, and for that reason are less exciting than some of their competitors. I don't want to overdo this, and don't want to deny that there are (at least as I believe) in every chapter both ideas and arguments which many people are likely to find provocative and novel. But they are the exception; and sensible, moderate and, I hope, reassuring views prevail. So, for example, I suggest that some lives are more meaningful than others, rather than that they are all irredeemably absurd. Similarly, I argue that it's often but not invariably bad to die, and thus reject the views both that death is always bad, and that it's never bad. And already in this chapter I've wanted to say that we can well enough understand the claim that everyone's a philosopher, without getting too steamed upon about whether or not we agree. None of this is particularly surprising or challenging. But it's all, I think, true. And it's truth I'm after.

I'll make one more point here, Someone once said that I seemed myself not to be particularly excited or gripped by the issues I'm trying

here to deal with. There might be something in this. Anyone brought up in 1950s' Yorkshire, rugby and coal mines to the west, fenland to the east, bubble and squeak for tea, learns soon enough to keep excitement and enthusiasm under wraps. It's the northern variant of the stiff upper lip. But if I didn't care, and deeply, about these questions, and their answers, I wouldn't have written this book.