



# Complaint

Julian Baggini • 2010 • Profile Books • £8.99

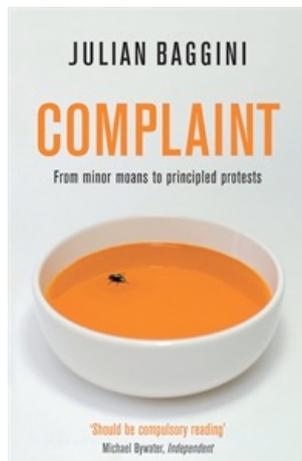
ACCORDING to Julian Baggini in this lively and lucid little book, complaint, without which there would be no progress, is a secular humanist act because it is resistance against the idea, promulgated by religion, that suffering is our divinely ordained lot and that we can do no more than put up with it piously. Instead, complaint is the insistence that justice must not wait for the next life but must be attained here.

Christianity is a good example. While God is forever complaining in the Old Testament, the New Testament teaches us not to try to alter the basic injustices of life. We must render unto Caesar and accept that the poor will be with us always. Jesus didn't lead a terrestrial rebellion to overthrow the Romans: "My kingdom is not of this world", he testifies at his trial. St Paul encourages slaves to know their place and keep in it.

The great success of Christianity, suggests Baggini, was that it made not complaining seem so natural when, to an outsider observer, a world in which millions of people live in misery should be up in arms at the deity who created them with so little apparent concern for their happiness.

Paul says: "Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things; not answering again". Indeed, this is the way organised Christianity behaved for nearly 2,000 years. Hence Nietzsche's view of it as a 'slave morality'. To paraphrase Baggini, it spoke to the poor, the weak and the dispossessed, and instead of encouraging them to overcome these limitations, it taught them that being at the bottom of the pile was virtuous. They should take heart from the fact that they will inherit the earth and it will be the fat rich who will struggle to squeeze through heaven's gates.

As Baggini says, it is no surprise that a dissenting religion with a lax stance on the authority of the Bible – i.e. the Quakers – was ahead of more orthodox denominations which took longer to see the injustice of bondage (he might have added



SOME 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterians in Ulster).

Jesus stresses VOLUNTARY aid, not resistance to oppressive power. Baggini mentions the poor record of the Catholic Church throughout its history on resistance to despicable regimes. It supported fascism in Italy and Spain and signed a concordat with the Nazi government in Germany in 1933. In Rwanda, Catholics were implicated in assisting the Hutus in the genocide of the Tutsis but, far from condemning them, the Pope's only direct intervention was to appeal for a stay of execution for those found guilty of these horrendous crimes.

Now, of course, Baggini is talking in generalities. You will certainly find bits of the Bible that present a slightly different picture. Revelation is a rant, for example. But you will also find many other bits that reinforce his argument, and by and large it is the latter that have triumphed in organised Christianity, Islam etc.

Baggini says that complaint is a distinguishing feature of our species because only we can conceive of a world different from the one in which we currently find ourselves. We are acutely conscious of the difference between the way things are and the way they ought to be. Thus it is the motor of social and moral progress.

The problem here, and it highlights the book's basic weakness, is that it depends what you are complaining

about. Baggini does try to distinguish between a complaint based on moral grounds and an opportunistic objection on grounds of self-interest. But Hitler in all sincerity constantly complained about the stab in the back Germany allegedly received by the Jews and the Bolsheviks, and the results were genocide and total war against the Soviet Union in which millions died. Conservatives' continual complaints about the power of unions led to the emasculation of workers' rights in the 1980s. And Conservative complaints about the 'overbearing power of the state' have now led to the daft and dangerous idea of a Big Society in which we do practically everything for ourselves – if we can afford the time and resources.

We are thus all in favour of those complaints that we agree with. Some of us also moan for the sheer hell of it without really wanting things to be put right. And what if they can't? Baggini quotes Niebuhr's prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference". Unfortunately, that difference is not easily detectable, even by the wise.

Nevertheless, Baggini's general thesis is correct, though perhaps 'criticism' would have been better as the concept on which to focus than 'complaint', which has an aura of Victor Meldrew's 'grumpy old man' about it. To make the world a happier place, we do indeed need to complain more, criticise more, accept less and in particular challenge those authorities, secular and religious, that are obstacles to progress. As Chekhov wrote: "To make a man better, you must first show him what he is". Without criticism, without analysis of society's weaknesses and shortcomings, there can be no improvement.

As Baggini says, "a man who is tired of complaining is tired of life". Or, to put a biblical spin on it, "the meek would have no world to inherit if the more petulant did not set about building one fit to last".