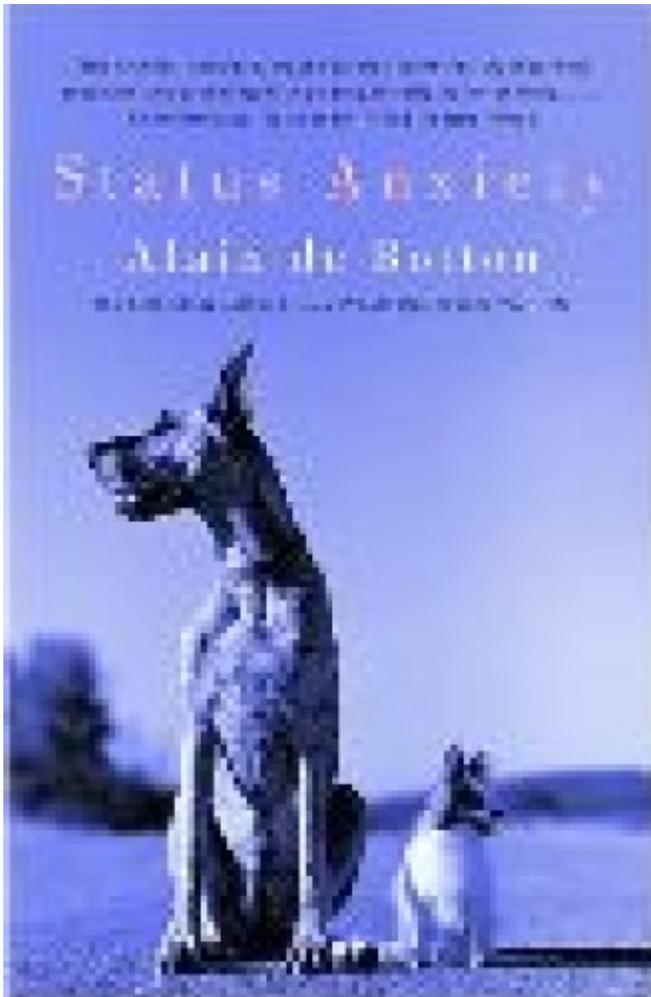


# A cure for what ails us

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 2, 2004](#) issue

## In Review



### **Status Anxiety**

Alain de Botton  
Pantheon

What do philosophers do? Do they, like other academics, get doctorates, publish for fellow academics, strive for tenure and advance up the academic ladder? Alain de

Botton defines a philosopher not as an ambitious academic, but as one who asks hard questions. Why do people work? Why do we travel? Why do we love? And why do we feel so rotten when we have so much stuff? De Botton reminds fellow philosophers of the time when their discipline's founder, Socrates, wandered around asking people questions so basic to their lives that they should have known the answer, but often didn't. He surprises those not given to turning to philosophy for help in daily life by showing them it can be just that.

The snippet of a biography on de Botton's Web site informs us that he was born in Switzerland and lives in London. He taught graduate students at the University of London, but his writing success seems to have turned writing into his primary vocation. At 23 he published his first book, *On Love*, the beginning of a series of three dealing with love and romance in a hybrid genre—part novel and part essay. His *The Art of Travel* (2002) got at the question of why our travels seem to disappoint us. Why do we voyage halfway round the world to stand, exhausted and bored, before ruins that seemed interesting in the brochure? Three more recent books deal with questions of philosophy proper, though in a form meant to attract a wide audience.

This is no small achievement in an age not given to reading of any kind, much less to reading philosophy. De Botton tries to help ordinary readers see in philosophy a resource for living well. For example, in his *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (1997) he gives readers Proustian insights on how to suffer, how to be a friend and how to love well, sparing them the need to read Proust's massive novels for themselves. He borrowed the title of *The Consolations of Philosophy* (2000) from the great philosopher Boethius, whose work inspired much of medieval Christendom.

Haven't read Boethius? No problem—de Botton doesn't talk about him. Rather, he plugs the thoughts of specific philosophers into the holes we feel in our souls. Socrates can heal the aches caused by the lack of friends and the misunderstanding of strangers. Epicurus teaches us that we don't need as much money or stuff as our culture tries to make us believe—just enough to survive and carry on friendships.

Seneca is a balm for road rage, teaching us to expect the disastrous to happen and to respond with stoic reserve when it does. Schopenhauer is our medic for disasters in love. When rejected we must realize that a great life force determines to whom we will be attracted and who will be drawn to us—part of its effort to improve the human species by crafting better babies. So when she says no, she can't help it, it's

the life force, don't feel so bad. Nietzsche teaches us to deal with suffering, for whatever doesn't kill us makes us stronger (a line I long used in sermons, only later realizing it originated with the great atheist).

De Botton writes for those who don't expect to like philosophy. He deftly entertains them into sympathy with the lives and thoughts of the "great philosophers," whose work he mines for psychological insight. Unlike most philosophers (or professionals of any sort), he doesn't take himself too seriously. A discussion of Jacques-Louis David's painting *The Death of Socrates* is immediately followed, without explanation, by a picture of the chocolate milk de Botton drank in the museum's café. And unlike postmodern philosophers with French names, impenetrable prose and barely concealed misanthropy, de Botton seems genuinely to like people and has an uncanny ability to name the pressures that harass them. He contrasts Socrates' martyrdom to philosophy with his own engagement with others:

In conversations, my priority was to be liked, rather than to speak the truth. A desire to please led me to laugh at modest jokes like a parent on the opening night of a school play. With strangers, I adopted the servile manner of a concierge greeting wealthy clients in a hotel—salival enthusiasm born of a morbid, indiscriminate desire for affection. I did not publicly doubt ideas to which the majority was committed. I sought the approval of figures of authority and after encounters with them, worried at length whether they had thought me acceptable. When passing through customs or driving alongside police cars, I harbored a confused wish for the uniformed officials to think well of me.

De Botton, of course, has remedies for this overdependence on the opinion of others. His newest book, *Status Anxiety*, offers a historical response to why people in modern Western democracies feel so anxious when they have so much luxury compared to what even the wealthiest enjoyed in earlier ages. His diagnosis: Since we live in a supposed meritocracy, there seems no one but ourselves to blame if we do not amass as much stuff or as many accolades as our neighbors. We are just "losers," to use our culture's most "chillingly contemptuous word." We chase status as though it were a form of love, which it indeed seems to be. We desire from others regard, respect and a willingness to notice our viewpoint and count it important. We work to compete, acquire and show off—and some must lose.

De Botton offers some resources for help against the desperate drive to prove our worth through relentless status acquisition—resources found in art, philosophy, religion, politics and bohemian dismissal. Each of these can offer powerful resistance to the dominant drive to success that precipitates our ruthless fears. Each suggests counterproposals for what should count as “status,” a kind of status not advanced by money and stuff.

De Botton has been praised and criticized as a “popularizer of philosophy.” On his Web site he takes umbrage at that suggestion and argues instead that he offers his own unique “philosophy of everyday life.” He pays due regard to others’ and his own deepest needs and fears, and addresses them respectfully through the insights of history’s greatest thinkers. In this he is a sort of theologian. Though he is not theologically trained or even a religious person (his knowledge of the history and thought of the church forms the thinnest portions of his work), he writes about ultimate matters: human purpose and brokenness, and possible remedies for that brokenness. His efforts to speak to ordinary people make him an apt conversation partner for preachers. He names well what readers feel, and tries to help them feel better.

But what if the philosophy presented as a cure for what ails us is patently false? Schopenhauer’s description of a life force bent on making me mate with someone whose nose size counters mine so as to produce babies with a more perfect schnozz fits the bill. This seems patent nonsense at best and pernicious social Darwinism at worst. False philosophy won’t heal genuine anxiety. How can one tell if a philosophical claim is false? De Botton passes over the traditional philosophical answer: “because it conforms to the truth.” Christians and others in continuity with ancient philosophy will see in de Botton’s narrow focus on anxiety a neglect of classical philosophy’s broader themes, such as metaphysics (truth with a capital “T”) and ontology (the question of being) in favor of attention to the dominant psychological malady of those striving to get ahead in a capitalist social order.

Such an emphasis is understandable, especially since such strivers tend to have the leisure and money to buy and read books about anxiety. Yet it leaves great swaths of classical philosophy untouched. Further, de Botton’s almost exclusive attention to non-Christian figures leaves great gaps in the kinds of problems he addresses. For example, what do I do if my anxiety is caused by a need for forgiveness? De Botton does not claim to speak to every psychological malady, but the anxieties he does treat will leave religious people wondering about the sorts of therapy great religious

minds have traditionally offered—forms of therapy perhaps more efficacious than those offered by secular thinkers.

Theologians and preachers have much to learn from de Botton. His earnest tackling of things that matter is a serious challenge to superficial sermons and to theology no less removed from ordinary life than most philosophy. If de Botton's publishing success is any indication (seven books, now translated into 20 languages), the sort of therapy the church once was adept at is alive and well in secular guise. If a shopper in an airport bookstore can grab his book on a whim and be entertainingly led into living a more examined life, the legacy of Socrates will have been honored. Christians, whose relationship to the Wisdom of God should enable them to recognize wisdom wherever it presents itself, will do well to celebrate.