

Status Anxiety

A. de Botton

March 10 - March 11, 2005

The practical uses of philosophy when it comes to achieve happiness in your own life constitute the general theme of de Botton's writing, executed through a dead-pan naive style with a few clever observations and illustrations. In the past the subject matter has been narrowed, as exemplified by the reading of Proust or the art of travel, or the specialized view of philosophy in terms of consolation. In the present book the matter is status, but in a very generalized sense which makes the book lacking in focus and reads as a hodge-podge of old ideas, some previously unused other already exploited. A mass of common-sense observations simply do not add up.

We are all sensitive to the opinions of others. In fact a large part of our self-esteem derives from the appreciations of others. This can clearly go to extremes, providing material for sarcasm, yet man being a social animal, we can never completely rid ourselves of this dependency and anxiety, and why should we really?

To draw the line between the legitimate concern of status and the exaggerated is not so easy, and the author does not really try to. There is a natural emphasis on the acquisition of money, a subject which may have been a more appropriate one, yet no real distinction between the desire for approval and the material benefits such may generate. The growth of a consumer society and its particular gratifications is something different from the pursuit of status and admiration, although of course the ostentatious display of wealth is an obvious stratagem for winning status.

Thus the author does not really address the deeper issues but contends himself with skimming the surface for effects. The net result is one of emptiness and disappointment. Maybe the author has come to the end of his tether, pressed to produce yet another best-seller, to earn the gratitude of his publisher and the admiration of his readers.

March 12, 2005 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*