

The Consolations of Philosophy

ALAIN DE BOTTON



PANTHEON BOOKS · NEW YORK

Copyright © 2000 by Alain de Botton

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto. Originally published in Great Britain by Hamish Hamilton, a division of Penguin Books Ltd., London.

Pantheon Books and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Permissions acknowledgments appear on pages 256–58.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

De Botton, Alain.

The consolations of philosophy / Alain de Botton.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-679-44276-6

1. Philosophical counseling. I. Title.

BJ1595.5.D43 2000 101—dc21 99-052188

www.pantheonbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

First American Edition

4 6 8 9 7 5 3

[The chapter title appears on page 43 in the original.]

Consolation for Not Having Enough Money

• • •
2

An anomaly among an often pleasure-hating and austere fraternity, there was one philosopher who seemed to understand and want to help. 'I don't know how I shall conceive of the good,' he wrote, 'if I take away the pleasures of taste, if I take away sexual pleasure, if I take away the pleasure of hearing, and if I take away the sweet emotions that are caused by the sight of beautiful forms.'

Epicurus was born in 341 BC on the verdant island of Samos, a few miles off the coast of Western Asia Minor. He took early to philosophy, travelling from the age of fourteen to hear lessons from the Platonist Pamphilus and the atomic philosopher Nausiphanes. But he found he could not agree with much of what they taught and by his late twenties had decided to arrange his thoughts into his own philosophy of life. He was said to have written 300 books on almost everything, including *On Love*, *On Music*, *On Just Dealing*, *On Human Life* (in four books) and *On Nature* (in thirty-seven books), though by a catastrophic series of mishaps, almost all were lost over the centuries, leaving his philosophy to be reconstructed from a few surviving fragments and the testimony of later Epicureans.

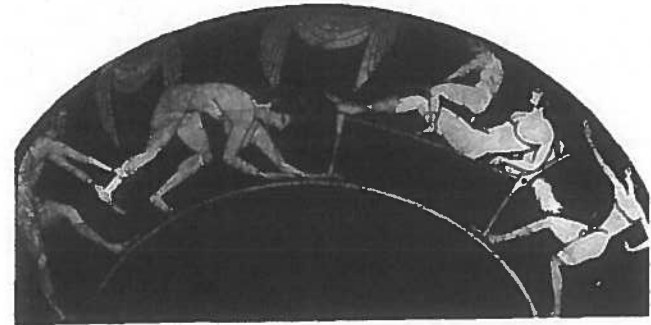
What immediately distinguished his philosophy was an emphasis on the importance of sensual pleasure: 'Pleasure is the beginning and the goal of a happy life,' asserted Epicurus, confirming what many had long thought but philosophy had rarely accepted. The philosopher confessed his love of excellent food: 'The beginning and root of every good is the pleasure of the stomach. Even wisdom and culture must be referred to this.' Philosophy properly performed was to be nothing less than a guide to pleasure:

The man who alleges that he is not yet ready for philosophy or that

Consolation for Not Having Enough Money

the time for it has passed him by, is like the man who says that he is either too young or too old for happiness.

Few philosophers had ever made such frank admissions of their interest in a pleasurable lifestyle. It shocked many, especially when they heard that Epicurus had attracted the support of some wealthy people, first in Lampsacus in the Dardanelles, and then in Athens, and had used their money to set up a philosophical establishment to promote happiness. The school admitted both men and women, and encouraged them to live and study pleasure together. The idea of what was going on inside the school appeared at once titillating and morally reprehensible.



There were frequent leaks from disgruntled Epicureans detailing activities between lectures. Timocrates, the brother of Epicurus's associate Metrodorus, spread a rumour that Epicurus had to vomit twice a day because he ate so much. And Diotimus the Stoic took the unkind step of publishing fifty lewd letters which he said had been written by Epicurus when he'd been drunk and sexually frenzied.

Despite these criticisms, Epicurus's teachings continued to attract support. They spread across the Mediterranean world; schools for pleasure were founded in Syria, Judaea, Egypt, Italy and Gaul; and the philosophy remained influential for the next 500 years, only

gradually to be extinguished by the hostility of forbidding barbarians and Christians during the decline of the Roman Empire in the West. Even then, Epicurus's name entered many languages in adjectival form as a tribute to his interests (*Oxford English Dictionary*: 'Epicurean: devoted to the pursuit of pleasure; hence, luxurious, sensual, gluttonous').

. . .

[The material below appears on pages 53 and 54 in the original.]

3

The consistency of the associations provoked by Epicurus's philosophy throughout the ages, from Diotimus the Stoic to the editors of *Epicurean Life*, testifies to the way in which, once the word 'pleasure' has been mentioned, it seems obvious what is entailed. 'What do I need for a happy life?' is far from a challenging question when money is no object.

. . .

At the heart of Epicureanism is the thought that we are as bad at intuitively answering 'What will make me happy?' as 'What will make me healthy?' The answer which most rapidly comes to mind is liable to be as faulty. Our souls do not spell out their troubles more clearly than our bodies, and our intuitive diagnoses are rarely any more accurate. . . .

. . .

It is because they understand bodily maladies better than we can that we seek doctors. We should turn to philosophers for the same reason when our soul is unwell – and judge them according to a similar criterion:

Just as medicine confers no benefit if it does not drive away physical illness, so philosophy is useless if it does not drive away the suffering of the mind.

The task of philosophy was, for Epicurus, to help us interpret our indistinct pulses of distress and desire and thereby save us from mistaken schemes for happiness. We were to cease acting on first impulses, and instead investigate the rationality of our desires according to a method of questioning close to that used by Socrates in evaluating ethical definitions over a hundred years earlier. And by providing what might at times feel like counter-intuitive diagnoses of our ailments, philosophy would – Epicurus promised – guide us to superior cures and true happiness.



Epicurus 341 BC–270 BC

4

Those who had heard the rumours must have been surprised to discover the real tastes of the philosopher of pleasure. There was no grand house. The food was simple, Epicurus drank water rather than wine, and was happy with a dinner of bread, vegetables and a palmful of olives. 'Send me a pot of cheese, so that I may have a feast whenever I like,' he asked a friend. Such were the tastes of a man who had described pleasure as the purpose of life.

He had not meant to deceive. His devotion to pleasure was far greater than even the orgy accusers could have imagined. It was just that after rational analysis, he had come to some striking conclusions about what actually made life pleasurable – and fortunately for those lacking a large income, it seemed that the essential ingredients of pleasure, however elusive, were not very expensive.

Happiness, an Epicurean acquisition list

I. Friendship

On returning to Athens in 306 BC at the age of thirty-five, Epicurus settled on an unusual domestic arrangement. He located a large house a few miles from the centre of Athens, in the Melite district between the market-place and the harbour at Piraeus, and moved in with a group of friends. He was joined by Metrodorus and his sister, the mathematician Polyaenus, Hermarchus, Leonteus and his wife Themista, and a merchant called Idomeneus (who soon married Metrodorus's sister). There was enough space in the house

for the friends to have their own quarters, and there were common rooms for meals and conversations.

Epicurus observed that:

Of all the things that wisdom provides to help one live one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship.

Such was his attachment to congenial company, Epicurus recommended that one try never to eat alone:

Before you eat or drink anything, consider carefully who you eat or drink with rather than what you eat or drink: for feeding without a friend is the life of a lion or a wolf.

The household of Epicurus resembled a large family, but there was seemingly no sullenness nor sense of confinement, only sympathy and gentleness.

We don't exist unless there is someone who can see us existing, what we say has no meaning until someone can understand, while to be surrounded by friends is constantly to have our identity confirmed; their knowledge and care for us have the power to pull us from our numbness. In small comments, many of them teasing, they reveal they know our foibles and accept them and so, in turn, accept that we have a place in the world. We can ask them 'Isn't he frightening?' or 'Do you ever feel that . . .?' and be understood, rather than encounter the puzzled 'No, not particularly' – which can make us feel, even when in company, as lonely as polar explorers.

True friends do not evaluate us according to worldly criteria, it is the core self they are interested in; like ideal parents, their love for us remains unaffected by our appearance or position in the social hierarchy, and so we have no qualms in dressing in old clothes and revealing that we have made little money this year. The desire for riches should perhaps not always be understood as a simple hunger for a luxurious life, a more important motive might be the wish to be appreciated and treated nicely. We may seek a fortune for no greater reason than to secure the respect and attention of people who would otherwise look straight through us. Epicurus, discerning

our underlying need, recognized that a handful of true friends could deliver the love and respect that even a fortune may not.

2. Freedom

Epicurus and his friends made a second radical innovation. In order not to have to work for people they didn't like and answer to potentially humiliating whims, they removed themselves from employment in the commercial world of Athens ('We must free ourselves from the prison of everyday affairs and politics'), and began what could best have been described as a commune, accepting a simpler way of life in exchange for independence. They would have less money but would never again have to follow the commands of odious superiors.

So they bought a garden near their house, a little outside the old Dipylon gate, and grew a range of vegetables for the kitchen, probably *bliton* (cabbage), *krommyon* (onion) and *kinara* (ancestor of the modern artichoke, of which the bottom was edible but not the scales). Their diet was neither luxurious nor abundant, but it was flavoursome and nutritious. As Epicurus explained to his friend Menoeceus, '[The wise man] chooses not the greatest quantity of food but the most pleasant.'

Simplicity did not affect the friends' sense of status because, by distancing themselves from the values of Athens, they had ceased to judge themselves on a material basis. There was no need to be embarrassed by bare walls, and no benefit in showing off gold. Among a group of friends living outside the political and economic centre of the city, there was – in the financial sense – nothing to prove.

3. Thought

There are few better remedies for anxiety than thought. In writing a problem down or airing it in conversation we let its essential

aspects emerge. And by knowing its character, we remove, if not the problem itself, then its secondary, aggravating characteristics: confusion, displacement, surprise.

There was much encouragement to think in the Garden, as Epicurus's community became known. Many of the friends were writers. According to Diogenes Laertius, Metrodorus, for one, wrote twelve works, among them the lost *Way of Wisdom* and *Of Epicurus's Weak Health*. In the common rooms of the house in Melite and in the vegetable garden, there must have been unbroken opportunities to examine problems with people as intelligent as they were sympathetic.

Epicurus was especially concerned that he and his friends learn to analyse their anxieties about money, illness, death and the supernatural. If one thought rationally about mortality, one would, Epicurus argued, realize that there was nothing but oblivion after death, and that 'what is no trouble when it arrives is an idle worry in anticipation.' It was senseless to alarm oneself in advance about a state which one would never experience:

There is nothing dreadful in life for the man who has truly comprehended that there is nothing terrible in not living.

Sober analysis calmed the mind; it spared Epicurus's friends the furtive glimpses of difficulties that would have haunted them in the unreflective environment beyond the Garden.



Wealth is of course unlikely ever to make anyone miserable. But the crux of Epicurus's argument is that if we have money without friends, freedom and an analysed life, *we will never be truly happy*. And if we have them, but are missing the fortune, *we will never be unhappy*.

To highlight what is essential for happiness and what may, if one is denied prosperity through social injustice or economic turmoil, be

forgone without great regrets, Epicurus divided our needs into three categories:

Of the desires, some are natural and necessary. Others are natural but unnecessary. And there are desires that are neither natural nor necessary.

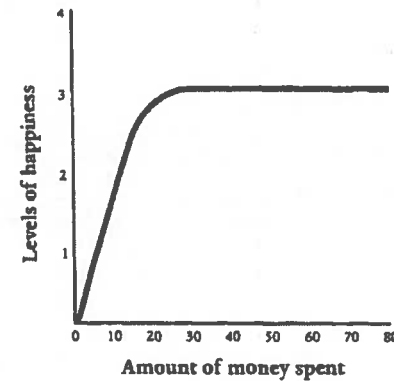
WHAT IS AND IS NOT ESSENTIAL FOR HAPPINESS

Natural and necessary	Natural but unnecessary	Neither natural nor necessary
Friends	Grand house	Fame
Freedom	Private baths	Power
Thought (about main sources of anxiety: death, illness, poverty, superstition)	Banquets	
Food, shelter, clothes	Servants	
	Fish, meat	

Crucially for those unable to make or afraid of losing money, Epicurus's tripartite division suggested that happiness was dependent on some complex psychological goods but relatively independent of material ones, beyond the means required to purchase some warm clothes, somewhere to live and something to eat – a set of priorities designed to provoke thought in those who had equated happiness with the fruition of grand financial schemes, and misery with a modest income.

To plot the Epicurean relation between money and happiness on a graph, money's capacity to deliver happiness is already present in small salaries and will not rise with the largest. We will not cease being happy with greater outlay, but we will not, Epicurus insisted, surpass levels of happiness already available to those on a limited income.

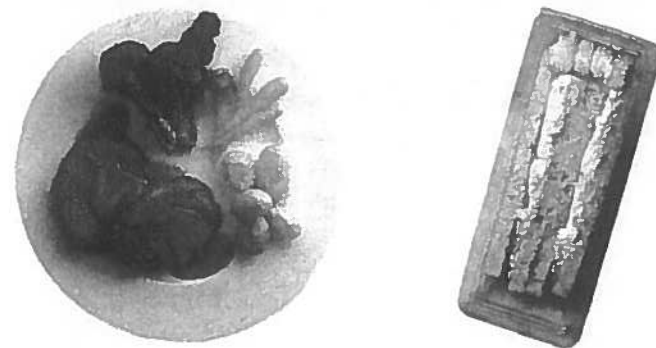
RELATION OF HAPPINESS TO MONEY FOR SOMEONE WITH FRIENDS, FREEDOM, ETC.



The analysis depended on a particular understanding of happiness. For Epicurus, we are happy if we are not in *active* pain. Because we suffer active pain if we lack nutrients and clothes, we must have enough money to buy them. But suffering is too strong a word to describe what will occur if we are obliged to wear an ordinary cardigan rather than a cashmere one or to eat a sandwich rather than sea scallops. Hence the argument that:

Plain dishes offer the same pleasure as a luxurious table, when the pain that comes from want is taken away.

Whether we regularly eat meals like the one on the right or like the one on the left cannot be the decisive factor in our state of mind.



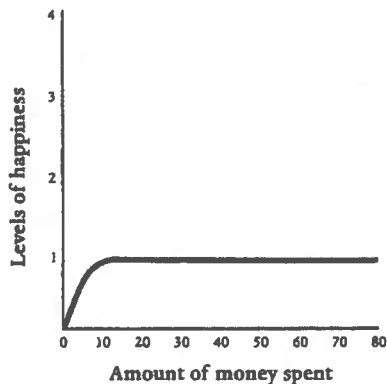
As for eating meat, it relieves neither any of our nature's stress nor a desire whose non-satisfaction would give rise to pain . . . What it contributes to is not life's maintenance but variation of pleasures . . . like drinking of exotic wines, all of which our nature is quite capable of doing without.

It may be tempting to attribute this disparagement of luxury to the primitive range of products available to the rich in the undeveloped economy of Hellenistic Greece. Yet the argument may still be defended by pointing to an imbalance in the ratio of price to happiness in products of later ages.



We would not be happy with the vehicle on the left but no friends; with a villa but no freedom; with linen sheets but too much anxiety to sleep. So long as essential non-material needs are unattended, the line on the graph of happiness will remain stubbornly low.

RELATION OF HAPPINESS TO MONEY FOR SOMEONE WITHOUT FRIENDS, FREEDOM, ETC.



Nothing satisfies the man who is not satisfied with a little.

To avoid acquiring what we do not need or regretting what we cannot afford, we should ask rigorously the moment we desire an expensive object whether we are right to do so. We should undertake a series of thought experiments in which we imagine ourselves projected in time to the moment when our desires have been realized, in order to gauge our likely degree of happiness:

The following method of inquiry must be applied to every desire:

What will happen to me if what I long for is accomplished? What will happen if it is not accomplished?

A method which, though no examples of it survive, must have followed at least five steps – which may without injustice be sketched in the language of an instruction manual or recipe book.

1. Identify a project for happiness.

In order to be happy on holiday, I must live in a villa.

2. Imagine that the project may be false. Look for exceptions to the supposed link between the desired object and happiness. Could one possess the desired object but not be happy? Could one be happy but not have the desired object?

Could I spend money on a villa and still not be happy?

Could I be happy on holiday and not spend as much money as on a villa?

3. If an exception is found, the desired object cannot be a necessary and sufficient cause of happiness.

It is possible to have a miserable time in a villa if, for example, I feel friendless and isolated.

It is possible for me to be happy in a tent if, for example, I am with someone I love and feel appreciated by.

The Consolations of Philosophy

4. In order to be accurate about producing happiness, the initial project must be nuanced to take the exception into account.

In so far as I can be happy in an expensive villa, this depends on being with someone I love and feel appreciated by.

I can be happy without spending money on a villa, as long as I am with someone I love and feel appreciated by.

5. True needs may now seem very different from the confused initial desire.

Happiness depends more on the possession of a congenial companion than a well-decorated villa.



The possession of the greatest riches does not resolve the agitation of the soul nor give birth to remarkable joy.

Why, then, if expensive things cannot bring us remarkable joy, are we so powerfully drawn to them? Because of an error similar to that of the migraine sufferer who drills a hole in the side of his skull: because expensive objects can feel like plausible solutions to needs we don't understand. Objects mimic in a material dimension what we require in a psychological one. We need to rearrange our minds but are lured towards new shelves. We buy a cashmere cardigan as a substitute for the counsel of friends.

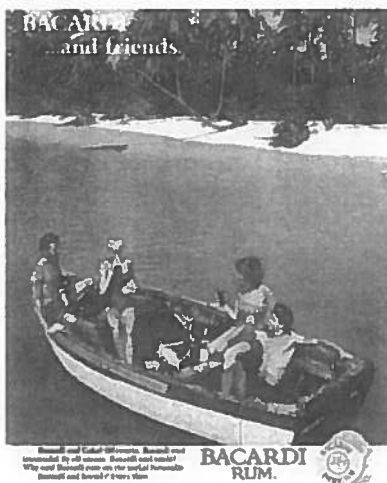
We are not solely to blame for our confusions. Our weak understanding of our needs is aggravated by what Epicurus termed the 'idle opinions' of those around us, which do not reflect the natural hierarchy of our needs, emphasizing luxury and riches, seldom friendship, freedom and thought. The prevalence of idle opinion is no coincidence. It is in the interests of commercial enterprises to skew the hierarchy of our needs, to promote a material vision of the good and downplay an unsaleable one.

And the way we are enticed is through the sly association of superfluous objects with our other, forgotten needs.

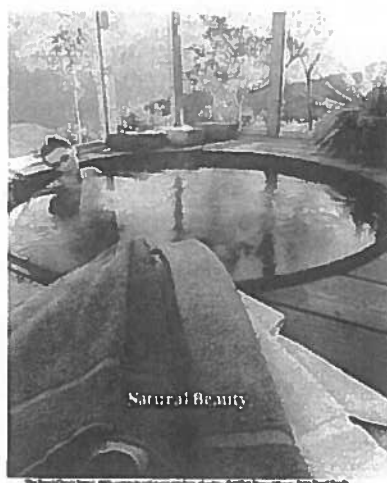


The Consolations of Philosophy

It may be a jeep we end up buying, but it was – for Epicurus – freedom we were looking for.



It may be the aperitif we purchase, but it was – for Epicurus – friendship we were after.



Consolation for Not Having Enough Money

It may be fine bathing accoutrements we acquire, but it was – for Epicurus – thought that would have brought us calm.

To counteract the power of luxurious images Epicureans appreciated the importance of advertising.

In the AD 120s, in the central market-place of Oinoanda, a town of 10,000 inhabitants in the south-western corner of Asia Minor, an enormous stone colonnade 80 metres long and nearly 4 metres high was erected and inscribed with Epicurean slogans for the attention of shoppers:

Luxurious foods and drinks . . . in no way produce freedom from harm and a healthy condition in the flesh.

One must regard wealth beyond what is natural as of no more use than water to a container that is full to overflowing.

Real value is generated not by theatres and baths and perfumes and ointments . . . but by natural science.

The wall had been paid for by Diogenes, one of Oinoanda's wealthiest citizens, who had sought, 400 years after Epicurus and his friends had opened the Garden in Athens, to share with his fellow inhabitants the secrets of happiness he had discovered in Epicurus's philosophy. As he explained on one corner of the wall:

Having already reached the sunset of my life (being almost on the verge of departure from the world on account of old age), I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a fine anthem to celebrate the fullness of pleasure and so to help now those who are well-constituted. Now, if only one person, or two or three or four or five or six . . . were in a bad predicament, I should address them individually . . . but as the majority of people suffer from a common disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, and as their number is increasing (for in mutual emulation they catch the disease from each other, like sheep) . . . I wished to use this stoa to advertise publicly medicines that bring salvation.

The massive limestone wall contained some 25,000 words advertising all aspects of Epicurus's thought, mentioning the importance of friendship and of the analysis of anxieties. Inhabitants shopping in

the boutiques of Oinoanda had been warned in detail that they could expect little happiness from the activity.



Advertising would not be so prevalent if we were not such suggestible creatures. We want things when they are beautifully presented on walls, and lose interest when they are ignored or not well spoken of. Lucretius lamented the way in which what we want is 'chosen by hearsay rather than by the evidence of [our] own senses'.

Unfortunately, there is no shortage of desirable images of luxurious products and costly surroundings, fewer of ordinary settings and individuals. We receive little encouragement to attend to modest gratifications – playing with a child, conversations with a friend, an afternoon in the sun, a clean house, cheese spread across fresh bread ('Send me a pot of cheese, so that I may have a feast whenever I like'). It is not these elements which are celebrated in the pages of *Epicurean Life*.

Art may help to correct the bias. Lucretius lent force to Epicurus's intellectual defence of simplicity by helping us, in superlative Latin verse, to feel the pleasures of inexpensive things:

We find that the requirements of our bodily nature are few indeed, no more than is necessary to banish pain, and also to spread out many pleasures for ourselves. Nature does not periodically seek anything more gratifying than this, not complaining if there are no golden images of youths about the house who are holding flaming torches in their right hands to illuminate banquets that go on long into the night. What does it matter if the hall doesn't sparkle with silver and gleam with gold, and no carved and gilded rafters ring to the music of the lute? Nature doesn't miss these luxuries when people can recline in company on the soft grass by a running stream under the branches of a tall tree and refresh their bodies pleasurably at small expense. Better still if the weather smiles on them, and the season of the year stipples the green grass with flowers.

*Ergo corpoream ad naturam pauca
videmus
esse opus omnino, quae demant
cumque dolorem.
delicias quoque uti multas substernere
possint
gratius interdum, neque natura ipsa
requirit,
si non aurea sunt iuvenum simulacra
per aedes
lampadas igniferas manibus retinentia
dextris,
lumina nocturnis epulis ut
suppeditentur,
nec domus argento fulget auroque
renidet
nec citharae reboant laqueata
aurataque templa,
cum tamen inter se prostrati in
gramine molli
propter aquae rivum sub ramis arboris
altae
non magnis opibus iucunde corpora
curant,
praesertim cum tempestas adridet et
anni
tempora conspergunt viridantis
floribus herbas.*

It is hard to measure the effect on commercial activity in the Greco-Roman world of Lucretius's poem. It is hard to know whether shoppers in Oinoanda discovered what they needed and ceased buying what they didn't because of the giant advertisement in their midst. But it is possible that a well-mounted Epicurean advertising campaign would have the power to precipitate global

The Consolations of Philosophy

economic collapse. Because, for Epicurus, most businesses stimulate unnecessary desires in people who fail to understand their true needs, levels of consumption would be destroyed by greater self-awareness and appreciation of simplicity. Epicurus would not have been perturbed:

When measured by the natural purpose of life, poverty is great wealth; limitless wealth, great poverty.

It points us to a choice: on the one hand, societies which stimulate unnecessary desires but achieve enormous economic strengths as a result; and on the other, Epicurean societies which would provide for essential material needs but could never raise living standards beyond subsistence level. There would be no mighty monuments in an Epicurean world, no technological advances and little incentive to trade with distant continents. A society in which people were more limited in their needs would also be one of few resources. And yet – if we are to believe the philosopher – such a society would not be unhappy. Lucretius articulated the choice. In a world without Epicurean values:

Mankind is perpetually the victim of a pointless and futile martyrdom, fretting life away in fruitless worries through failure to realise what limit is set to acquisition and to the growth of genuine pleasure.

But at the same time:

It is this discontent that has driven life steadily onward, out to the high seas . . .

We can imagine Epicurus's response. However impressive our ventures on to the high seas, the only way to evaluate their merits is according to the pleasure they inspire:

It is to pleasure that we have recourse, using the feeling as our standard for judging every good.

And because an increase in the wealth of societies seems not to guarantee an increase in happiness, Epicurus would have suggested that the needs which expensive goods cater to cannot be those on which our happiness depends.