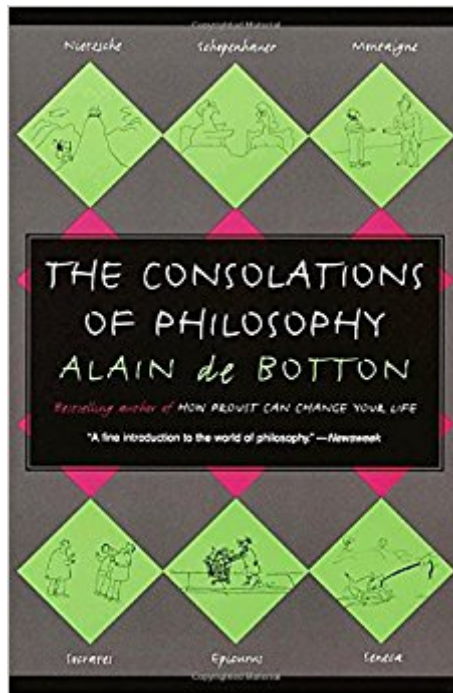




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# The Consolations Of Philosophy



## Synopsis

From the internationally heralded author of *How Proust Can Change Your Life* comes this remarkable new book that presents the wisdom of some of the greatest thinkers of the ages as advice for our day to day struggles. Solace for the broken heart can be found in the words of Schopenhauer. The ancient Greek Epicurus has the wisest, and most affordable, solution to cash flow problems. A remedy for impotence lies in Montaigne. Seneca offers advice upon losing a job. And Nietzsche has shrewd counsel for everything from loneliness to illness. *The Consolations of Philosophy* is a book as accessibly erudite as it is useful and entertaining.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"It is common," Alain de Botton writes in *The Consolations of Philosophy*, "to assume that we are dealing with a highly intelligent book when we cease to understand it. Profound ideas cannot, after all, be explained in the language of children." While his easygoing exploration of philosophers from Socrates to Nietzsche isn't exactly written for the Blue's Clues set, few readers will cease to understand it. Furthermore, it's a joy to read. De Botton's 1997 *How Proust Can Change Your Life* forged a new kind of lit crit: an exploration of *Remembrance of Things Past*, delivered in the sweet-gummed envelope of an advice book. He returns to the self-help format here, this time plundering the great thinkers to puzzle out the way we ought to live. What was stunning about the Proust book was de Botton's brazen annexing of a hallowed novelist to address lite emotional problems. That format is less arresting when applied to the philosophers, since which earnest philosophy major has not, from time to time, tried to apply the alpine heights of thought to his own

humble worries? Usually, sophomoric attempts to turn to, say, Kant for advice on love tend to be unmitigated disasters. In de Botton's case, however, he is able to find consolation for a broken heart in Schopenhauer, consolation for inadequacy in Montaigne. Epicurus, usually associated with a love of luxury, is a solace for those of us without much money--and de Botton learns from him that "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." Lest the reader become burdened by all this philosophizing, the book is peppered with illustrations--the section on Nietzsche of course includes a DC Comics drawing of Superman. And it's further leavened by the author's personal anecdotes and winning confessional tone. Early on, for instance, he admits his own gnawing need for popularity: "A desire to please led me to laugh at modest jokes like a parent on the opening night of a school play." Before he became a medicine man for the soul, de Botton was a first-rate novelist, and it shows in his writing. --Claire Dederer --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Three years ago, de Botton offered a delightful encounter with a writer many find unapproachable, in his bestselling *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. Now he attempts a similar undertaking--not wholly successful--with the great philosophers. In clear, witty prose, de Botton (who directs the graduate philosophy program at London University) sets some of their ideas to the mundane task of helping readers with their personal problems. Consolation for those feeling unpopular is found in the trial and death of Socrates; for those lacking money, in Epicurus' vision of what is essential for happiness. Seneca's stoicism assists us in enduring frustration; Schopenhauer, of all people, mends broken hearts (by showing that "happiness was never part of the plan"); and Nietzsche encourages us to embrace difficulties. Black-and-white illustrations cleverly (sometimes too cleverly) accent the text: a "Bacardi and friends" ad, for example, illustrates the Epicurean doctrine of confused needs. Self-deprecating confessions pepper the book, a succinct account of an episode of impotence being the most daring. The quietly ironic style and eclectic approach will gratify many postmodern readers. But since the philosophers' opinions often cancel each other out (Montaigne undermines Seneca's trust in rational self-mastery, and Nietzsche repudiates "virtually all" that Schopenhauer taught), readers will need to pick and choose whose cogitations to take to heart. At his best (e.g., on Socrates), de Botton offers lucid popularization--an enjoyable read with "a few consoling and practical things" to say. (Apr.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

I first learned of this book while watching the PBS series in December 2011, that was based on this work, featuring the author Alain de Botton as host (this was a great program to stumble upon during the miasma of the holiday season!). That series, similarly to the book, was comprised of one episode dedicated to each of the 6 philosophers in question (Socrates, Epicurus, Seneca, Montaigne, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche). I found this work to be a fast, enjoyable and accessible read. It was absorbing enough that I was able to read it in public amid noise and distractions. "Consolations of Philosophy" was not something that I had to labour over; the focus and intention of this book's main themes and subsequent discussions were clear. De Botton deconstructed the principal concepts of these philosophers down to their essence. And as several other reviewers have mentioned, this work functions as both an introduction to philosophy -- As well as a self-help book. For anyone going through hard times in his / her life -- Emotionally, socially, fiscally -- This book will indeed be a great "consolation". The only philosopher whose works I had read previous to reading "Consolations of Philosophy" was Nietzsche, a writer whose books ("Birth of Tragedy", "The Case of Wagner", "Twilight of the Idols" and "Also Sprach Zarathustra

These are not the easy consolations of religion or psychology, telling us that everything will work out in the end or that we can be cured of our anxieties if we only have faith and employ a bit of self-help, these are the consolations of philosophy. Easy consolations are cruel lies as Nietzsche tells us. Philosophy provides understanding, not consolation, but the greatest consolation comes from understanding. What I present here is a quick summary of the consolations offered. I cannot do the chapters written by Alain de Botton justice with these short summaries, please read the book. The book itself cannot do justice to the philosophers selected, please read the philosophers. Each has much more to offer, far beyond the simple consolations outlined in this book, but this book is a readable and easily accessible introduction. The subject matter of philosophy is drawn from the real life problems faced by real people confronted by reality. As such, Alain de Botton follows the example of Socrates in trying to make philosophy accessible to anyone with a taste for it. It is my modest hope that this abbreviated summary will help increase the appetite for philosophy. Unpopularity -- Look to Socrates and understand that your unpopular is simply a majority or plurality opinion and that very often majority opinions are irrational. Most popular opinions about life and reality are based upon misunderstandings, ignorance and mistakes anyway. Take comfort and treat such easy popular opinions and conventional wisdom with the skepticism that they deserve. Popular opinion is often as mistaken as it is held to be certain and common sense is too common to be of any value. We have the right, and the duty, to question all

popular opinions, especially opinions about our worth. Living without thinking is popular, but you think, therefore you are unpopular- take consolation.

### Not Having Enough Money

Look to Epicurus and understand that wealth cannot buy happiness. Pursuit of wealth, power and fame is a fool's errand. The fool mistakes the acquisition of wealth for the things in this very short life that do have value such as friendship, thoughtfulness and freedom from exaggerated desire. You do not have enough money? How much money is enough? There is a diminishing marginal utility to wealth not found in friendship and thoughtfulness. Take consolation, you have not contracted the plague of endless desire, not everything desired is desirable anyway. You are not owned by material things, rejoice, you are the healthy one!

### Frustration

Look to Seneca and understand that frustration is the product of your unrealistic and overly optimistic expectations. Temper your expectations and you will reduce your frustration level. We take great comfort in anticipation only to find that anticipation lies. A belief that everything will go well or as planned is the surest road to frustration. The cruel evil empress of the world herself, Fortune, intervenes in our lives too often. We should meditate on death and disaster daily to temper unrealistic hopes, anticipations and expectations and thus avoid metaphysical shocks. Always anticipate the worst and you find consolation in that things are not that bad after all.

### Inadequacy

Look to Montaigne and understand that those who find you to be inadequate or weird cannot see beyond their own limited experience of existence. What is accepted as normal leaves out more of the human experience that it includes. The world is more peculiar than the adequate and inadequate people can see. The dichotomy between normal and abnormal, adequate and inadequate is a false one. I will quote from the Roman playwright Terence who once said: "I am human, nothing of that which is human is alien to me." So the next time you meet or hear about a trans-gendered person, cut them a break, their experience of life is just a human as yours. Take consolation, error stalks all narrowly conceived human judgments, there is more to you than the judgment of another person can do justice. Certainty is the hobgoblin of small minds.

### Broken Heart

Look to Schopenhauer and take consolation in never having found the perfect spouse, there is no such thing. The best that can be hoped for is mutual toleration and at its worst, the spouses become the object of disgust to each other. We should not be surprised by misery. Happiness was never part of nature's plan; just reproduction of suitable offspring. All of this bother about romantic love is nothing more than the path to fulfill the command of nature to reproduce. Your broken heart is just a symptom of the reproductive impulse being frustrated. Be consoled, your

broken heart is result of a love interest that itself is the result of a misjudgment as what would make you happy? Be glad that your misjudgment was terminated, thank the one who rejected you and be wiser in the next encounter if this is possible. Difficulties are the source of joy. Look to Nietzsche and find that difficulty, mastering difficulty, is the source of fulfillment. Difficulties are thus a source of joy. Our greatest pain is thus juxtaposed with our greatest joy. Rejoice in your difficulties, your growth is impossible without them. We all know the Nietzschean aphorism, "What does not kill me makes me stronger." Without pain to move us, we will languish in mediocrity. We will suffer in the course of overcoming difficulty and this is necessary as well as unavoidable and even desirable. Find in your difficulties great consolation, the mistake is to believe that success is possible without difficulty. Every adversity is thus an opportunity for growth if we do not waste it. Difficulty is the path to acquiring greatness. In Nietzschean terms, adversity is the necessary root for the flower of triumph. The consolation is that often a desirable result must start with an undesirable beginning. The road to fulfillment is not an easy one. The desire to abolish difficulty is as stupid as the desire to abolish bad weather.

I saw the TV series on public television and it had my full attention for several hours. The author provides a summary of some major philosophers by using a chronological / problem oriented format. That is, for each of chapter there is a certain philosopher and problem examined in combination. Some of the top rated reviews for this book list the challenges. After reading from the author's other very good books, and hearing a few on CD, I conclude that Alain de Botton is trying to make historical philosophy more relevant for today and the contemporary mindset of young and middle aged people. However, one tension that could arise from using philosophy to adapt to society's circumstances is that one would become overly introverted and disengaged from public life. Then again, the consolations of philosophy can allow one to resolve certain dilemmas and then resolutely press forward on social, political and scientific goals one has reached through rational thought.

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