

# Getting Past the Velvet Ropes

## Status Anxiety in Neptune

*William Irwin*

If a visitor from a long time ago or from a culture far, far away dropped into Neptune, that visitor would be amazed by the great wealth not just of the Kanes, Echolls, and Casablanças, but also of the Navarros, Mars, and Fennels. They all have more than enough to eat, plenty of clothes, climate-controlled dwelling places with indoor plumbing, and cars and motorcycles to take them wherever they want to go. But it wouldn't take our visitor long to see that, despite the incredible base level of wealth, not everyone is considered the same. There are differences in status, in one's standing in society. Some are at the top, some are at the bottom, and, despite Veronica's description of Neptune as "a town without a middle class," some are in the middle.

These differences would likely seem silly to our visitor, who would consider all the Neptunians wildly wealthy. After just a little time in town, though, our visitor would be able to identify the problem plaguing Neptune: status anxiety. Everyone is worried about where he or she fits on the hierarchy of standing and importance. Our visitor wouldn't necessarily have to be human to grasp the importance of status. Some lower primates sort themselves, with alpha males beating their chests, feeding first, and

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claiming privileged mating rights. We humans would like to think we are above such vulgar displays, yet a quick glance at Neptune or at our own town reveals that we may be more subtle, but only a little.

## Backup

Where we fit in, what our status is, matters. It matters to the way others treat us, but, maybe more importantly, it matters to the way we think of ourselves. And the two are linked. The way others treat us influences the way we think of ourselves. In his book *Status Anxiety*, Alain de Botton discusses both the causes of and the solutions to the problem.<sup>1</sup> Most impressive among the solutions are philosophy and art.

The phrase “be philosophical about it” virtually identifies philosophy with Stoicism, the philosophy that counsels us to determine our own feelings and state of mind without regard to what others think, believe, say, or do. Epictetus (55–135 CE), one of the leading Stoic philosophers, counseled:

Remember that the insult does not come from the person who abuses you or hits you, but from your judgement that such people are insulting you. Therefore, whenever someone provokes you, be aware that it is your own opinion that provokes you. Try, therefore, in the first place, not to be carried away by your impressions, for if you can gain time and delay, you will more easily control yourself.<sup>2</sup>

Seeming to speak directly to Veronica on the eve of Shelly Pomeroy’s party, Epictetus says:

[I]f you have not been invited to someone’s party that is because you have not paid them the price for which an invitation is sold. They sell it for praise; they sell it for flattery. Pay the price, then, for which it is sold, if you think this will be to your advantage.

But if at the same time you do not want to pay the one, yet wish to receive the other, you are insatiable and foolish. Do you have nothing, then, in place of the invitation? You have this—you have not had to praise the person you did not want to praise, and you have not had to bear the insolence of their doorkeepers.<sup>3</sup>

Epictetus believed that one's dignity and self-respect were far more important than one's status. That might seem an easy thing for him to say, though. After all, Epictetus had been a slave and had a crippled leg. He had no real chance of achieving status, and so it was easy for him to think that status doesn't matter. Yuck, those grapes you can't reach must be sour—right, Epictetus? Maybe not.

Another leading Stoic philosopher of antiquity was Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE). You may have heard of him, especially if you saw *Gladiator*—he was portrayed in that one. Russell Crowe beat out Aaron Echolls for the title role. (I forget who played Marcus Aurelius—it was a small part.<sup>4</sup>) Marcus Aurelius was the emperor of Rome, the most powerful man in the world at the time. People like Jake Kane bowed before him. And yet he was a Stoic. After his death, the private journal of Marcus Aurelius was published as a work of Stoic philosophy, under the title *Meditations*. What did the most powerful man in the world have to worry about? Plenty. There were threats from barbarian tribes; but, more seriously, there were plots against him among his own people, including his own “friends.” Even closer to home, his wife was having affairs. Marcus Aurelius could have gotten very upset and could have turned brutal and vindictive, but instead he turned philosophical, saying: “Will any man despise me? Let him see to it. But I will see to it that I may not be found doing or saying anything that deserves to be despised.”<sup>5</sup> The Stoic emperor realized and accepted that the thoughts and actions of other people were beyond his direct control. At most he could influence them, and all attempts to have an influence would come at a price, often to be paid with his own serenity.

So two of the most important Stoics of the ancient world were a slave and an emperor. This gives us some hope that Stoicism could work in Neptune. But it leaves us wondering how it would work for someone like Keith Mars, who is neither a PCH-er nor an 09-er. Happiness is an inside job, that's the Stoic message. Virtue is its own reward, they would say. Through practice and effort you can develop your good character traits, your virtues, and no one can take those away from you, no matter what they say or do. Neptune society can kick Keith Mars out of office and label him a liar and a loser, but it can't take away his virtue and his dignity. He knows that he's honest, truth seeking, diligent, and intelligent. And he doggedly pursues the truth about Lilly Kane despite costs in status.

Keith is a mere mortal, though, and not exempt from feeling some status anxiety, especially on behalf of his daughter. Members of the Mars family have had to scale back their lifestyle, and Veronica has been ostracized by the 09-er crowd. Thankfully, like her father, Veronica has backup—no, not Backup the dog, but backup in the form of other things to make her feel good about herself. Sure she would like to have the approval and endorsement of the 09-er crowd. Who wouldn't? But Veronica finds that she can derive self-worth and happiness from many of the same virtues her father has: honesty, a dedication to the truth, diligence, and intelligence. And the approval of her father and of friends like Wallace and Mac is all she needs. As Botton says: "A mature solution to status anxiety may be said to begin with the recognition that status is available from, and awarded by a variety of different audiences ... and that our choice among them may be free and willed."<sup>6</sup>

## **The Computer Geek and the Snitch**

Let's face it, though, Veronica has one major advantage over her father. She's cute as a button, and not in some dumb-blonde way. Her sassy wit makes her otherwise dime-a-dozen Californian

good looks something special. She's charismatic without being unctuous or ingratiating. She's confident without being arrogant. And this sure makes life easier for Veronica than it would be if she were the nerdy bookworm type. Speaking of which, her friend Cindy "Mac" Mackenzie doesn't have it easy and doesn't turn heads as she walks down the hall. Mac loves her family, but she doesn't quite fit in. They like NASCAR and camping, whereas she likes NPR and computers. It turns out that there's a reason for this: she was switched at birth with the despicable Madison Sinclair, who now resides with Mac's biological parents and exploits their wealth for all the status it will get her—including by throwing a lavish sixteenth birthday party for herself ("Silence of the Lamb"). Despite Epictetus' advice, Mac can't help but attend the party, bonding with her unwitting biological little sister and visiting the house afterward, to meet her biological mother, on the pretense of having left her purse in the library. Later, before leaving for a camping trip with her family – the Mackenzies – Mac sees her biological mother parked across the street. In a poignant scene, Mac walks up to the car. She and Mrs. Sinclair make knowing eye contact with each other as they each press hands against the car window.

Mac's life isn't bad. Still, she can't help but imagine how it would be better with her biological family. She seems to suffer from what Botton describes as "the feeling that we might, under different circumstances, be something other than what we are—a feeling inspired by exposure to the superior achievements of those whom we take to be our equals—that generates anxiety and resentment."<sup>7</sup> Mac would not, we hope, use the status of the Sinclair family the way Madison does, to develop popularity, but would avail herself instead of her parents' resources to develop her mind, as her biological sister Lauren has.

Who knows? Madison, too, may have been better off with her biological parents. Despite her life of privilege, Madison is not particularly happy; she wants to have more and more. Maybe, if she grew up with the Mackenzies, Madison would have been

more appreciative of what she had and would not have become so acquisitive. Mac, unlike Madison, manages to make the most of her life. Although she doesn't really fit in with her family, she loves them; and, although she does not have Madison's 09-er zip code or Veronica's good looks, Mac still has status. She's smart and creative and unmatched as a computer whiz. Veronica befriends Mac and counts on her on numerous occasions to help solve mysteries.

Mac manages to feel good about herself because she has talent. Like most adolescents, she isn't brimming over with confidence and good cheer, but she at least avoids despair and feelings of worthlessness. Wallace Fennel, however, didn't seem to stand much of a chance at avoiding those depths. His career at Neptune High began with his being taped naked to the flag pole, as "snitch" was scrawled across his chest. Were it not for Veronica, there's no telling for how long he would have been hanging there. But an ostracized Veronica had become increasingly sensitive to the plight of the victimized and got him down.

As one of the very few African Americans in a school dominated by rich white kids and poor Hispanic kids, Wallace doesn't start with very good odds of establishing status. If he had some serious street cred, things might be different. But Wallace is not "straight out of Compton" cool. I mean, let's face it, he's not very cool at all. He may hang around with a pretty blonde, but they're truly just friends. How sad. As it turns out, Wallace has a source of status, though: he's a terrific basketball player. It's a little disappointing that the show perpetuates this stereotype. The black guy is the star basketball player and wins status that way? Come on. Rob Thomas could do better than that. The only other black male we see at Neptune High is Bryce Hamilton, son of Percy "Bone" Hamilton, the thuggish music producer who scorns his studious, bespectacled son for being a nerd who wants to get out of gym class. Of course, Bryce gets back at his father by ingeniously demanding ransom for his not actually kidnapped sister in the form of his father's beloved ring ("Lord of the Bling").

Bryce gains some status in his father's eyes as a result, and surely he has some status in the eyes of his teachers and the geek squad for his intelligence, but it's safe to assume that his high school life is otherwise rather unhappy.<sup>8</sup>

### **Lessons from the Navarros**

Eli "Weevil" Navarro is way down at the bottom of Neptune's status totem pole. He's poor, Hispanic, without parents or good job prospects, and he's constantly in trouble with the law. Indeed he becomes a janitor, mopping the floors on which Veronica and Logan walk to class at Hearst College. Despite all this, though, Weevil is not without status. He is, at least for a time, a respected leader in the PCH Bike Club. He may not be book smart, but he's intelligent—Veronica's equal or better in navigating Neptune's underworld. Weevil is also tough. Despite being vertically challenged at 5'6", he never hesitates to get up on his toes and into Logan Echolls's 5'11" face. Indeed, Weevil fears no man. More than with any of the other characters we've considered, Weevil's status is self-made. Veronica, by contrast, was born pretty and was encouraged to do well in school. She can't take too much credit on those scores. Weevil has a grandmother who raises him and an uncle who looks out for him, but that was no guarantee for his gaining status in the PCH community. His toughness may be inborn to a certain extent, but, insofar as anyone can take credit for his or her status, Weevil can. This is not to say that he feels no pain.

Weevil envies and despises Logan Echolls and his ilk, people who have everything handed to them. He would have been glad to have been born on the other side of the tracks, with a silver spoon in his mouth and a pool in his backyard. To his credit, though, Weevil doesn't let his starting point in life keep him down. He makes his way in the world, even winning the affection of the lovely Lilly Kane for a time. Unfortunately their liaison must be

kept secret, and so, while it fills him up inside, it wins him no status outside. The future may not be kind to Weevil, but there is at least hope. He has left the life of crime behind, and with his intelligence, toughness, and confidence he may well become a success—whatever that means.

And really what does it mean? It doesn't mean making a lot of money and getting hitched to a looker. Those things would confer status but they would not necessarily bring happiness. Just think of Aaron Echolls. And, although such things are within the grasp of Eli Navarro, they are not within the grasp of everyone. The average resident of Weevil's neighborhood does not have a good chance of attaining status. Weevil's grandmother, for example, worked for the Echolls cleaning their house, before she was fired on the suspicion that she had stolen credit cards from the family's mail. Of course the real thief was Weevil's cousin, Chardo Navarro ("Credit Where Credit's Due").

We do not get to know Weevil's grandmother very well, but we do see that she doesn't have any of the typical tickets to status. She's not particularly wealthy, beautiful, intelligent, or charismatic. Should we suppose, then, that she doesn't feel good about herself? After all, low status means low self-esteem, doesn't it? Of course not. Neptune is populated by plenty of high-status, low self-esteem people like Lynn Echolls. And there is no reason to think that Weevil's grandmother and people like her are without self-esteem – or even status – despite lacking the most noticeable status makers. Weevil's love for his grandmother—and especially his commitment to graduate from high school for her sake—tells us that she's a good person. She has dignity, and perhaps even status, which derive from her ability to do the right thing. As the Stoics believed, so Mrs. Navarro confirms: virtue is its own reward. She can be falsely accused and saddled with hardships, but she remains in control of her own virtue. Weevil's *abuela* (grandmother) has status in his eyes and, we can bet, in the eyes of the rest of her family and community.

## Other People Suck

But the eyes of others are not easy to deal with, as the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) saw it. Veronica would probably agree with the bumper sticker “Mean people suck,” but Sartre would take it further. Sartre didn’t write bumper sticker slogans; but, if he had, one would be “Other people suck.” Actually, Sartre said “Hell is other people,” and that’s more than worthy of a bumper sticker.<sup>9</sup> For Sartre, human relations are fraught with conflict. We are constantly labeling others in our minds, and those others are labeling us in turn. So we struggle to show others that we’re more than, or other than, the labels they put on us, while nonetheless we continue to put labels on them. Veronica knows the feeling well. Lots of guys, including the captain of industry on the jury in “One Angry Veronica,” look at her as if she’s just a dumb blonde, and Principal Alan Moorehead and Sheriff Don Lamb look at her as if she were just a troublemaker. We, of course, know that she is so much more.

Digressing from *Veronica Mars* for a moment, let’s consider the character Samad in Zadie Smith’s novel *White Teeth*, who works as a waiter and has become tired of what Sartre calls “the look.” Actually, on the basis of her experience as a hostess at Java the Hut, Veronica could surely relate. In comically poignant terms, Samad tells us that he wants to hang a sign around his neck that says:

I am not a waiter. I have been a student, a scientist, a soldier, my wife is called Alsana, we live in east London but we would like to move north. I am a Muslim but Allah has forsaken me or I have forsaken Allah, I’m not sure. I have a friend—Archie—and others. I am forty-nine but women still turn in the street. Sometimes.<sup>10</sup>

We can sympathize, of course. All of us have experienced being reduced to our momentary role by the look of the other, and we’ve all been guilty of looking at others that way—even Keith

Mars. The former sheriff's a pretty open-minded guy, but he disapproves of Veronica tutoring Weevil, because he sees the PCH-er as nothing but a criminal ("Hot Dogs").

It's all enough to make you think that maybe the best thing to do would be to drop out of society altogether. The great pessimistic philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) said that "there is in this world only the choice between loneliness and vulgarity."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, he believed that "most society is so constituted that whoever exchanges it for loneliness makes a good bargain"<sup>12</sup> and that experiencing life in society makes one "as little inclined to frequent associations with others as schoolmasters to join the games of the boisterous and noisy crowds of children who surround them."<sup>13</sup> That may be a bit extreme, but when Veronica labeled Duncan Kane as a murderer through her suspicion, that was enough for him to take flight to Cuba, even though he was innocent ("A Trip to the Dentist"). The "look" of Veronica and the rest of Neptune was simply too much to bear.

## Status Update

Philosophy may not cut it for you, at least not totally. Sartre's analysis of human relations and Schopenhauer's pessimism make it clear that being stoical is much easier said than done. So you may need the remedy of art. That's where *Veronica Mars* comes in handy again. Yes, Rob Thomas's *Veronica Mars* is art every bit as much as Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Okay, it's not as great as those masterpieces, but it's art nonetheless. And one of the important functions of art is therapy. Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) *Poetics* praised tragedies like *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* for their ability to produce catharsis – a kind of purging of negative emotions, particularly pity and fear. We don't have to experience the terrible fates of Oedipus or Antigone to identify with their misfortunes and dilemmas. Curiously, through our

identification with these title characters we come away feeling not worse but better.

Aristotle also wrote a book on comedy, which unfortunately has been lost. Of course, *Veronica Mars* isn't exactly a comedy, but then again the kind of plays Aristotle was considering as comedies weren't exactly goofball sitcoms. Despite its *noir* sensibilities, *Veronica Mars* manages to be comedic, and sometimes even literally laugh-out-loud funny. We feel for some of the characters, but we can also see how silly it is to worry too much about what parties we're invited to and where we fit into the pecking order at the office. As Botton says: "Comedy reassures us that there are others in the world no less envious or socially fragile than ourselves."<sup>14</sup> It's in identifying with Veronica and other residents of Neptune that we can learn to laugh at ourselves.

Ultimately, when it comes to status anxiety, laughter may be the best medicine. So, for your next status update on Facebook, try this: "Watching *Veronica Mars* and laughing my way to feeling better." You'll get a lot of "likes," and that will make you feel better too.

## Acknowledgment

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## Notes

1. Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).
2. *Epicurus' Handbook and the Tablet of Cebes*, trans. Keith Seddon (London: Routledge, 2005), ch. 20.
3. *Ibid.*, ch. 25 (translation modified).
4. I looked it up on IMDB (Internet Movie Data Base). It was Richard Harris.

5. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. A. S. L. Farquharson (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), 82; compare Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 114.
6. Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 292.
7. *Ibid.*, 26.
8. For more on race in Neptune and its intersection with issues of class, see Chapter 3 in this volume, by Regena Saulsberry.
9. Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 45. Strictly speaking, it is the character Garcin who says this, but the view fits pretty well with Sartre's view of interpersonal relationships.
10. Zadie Smith, *White Teeth: A Novel* (New York: Vintage International, 2001). Cf. Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 134. The text is printed in capital letters in the novel.
11. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Six Long Philosophical Essays*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 472; cf. Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 119.
12. Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 421; cf. Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 119.
13. Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 472; cf. Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 119.
14. Botton, *Status Anxiety*, 170.