

cannot seize the day, for it vanishes into the past as you try. Everything tumbles into the abyss, nothing is stable; palaces and empires crumble to dust, the universe grows cold, and all will be forgotten in the end.

*Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What profit hath a man, for all his labour which he taketh under the sun?*

The dead, beyond it all, are to be envied. Death is a luxury. Best of all not to have been born, but once born, better quickly dead.

The peril here is what the philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753) called the vice of abstraction, or 'the fine and subtle net of abstract ideas which has so miserably perplexed and entangled the minds of men'. It is much easier to lament the hollow nature and the inconsistencies of desire if we stay out of focus, keeping the terms of discussion wholly abstract. Thus, it sounds miserable if the satisfaction of desire is fleeting, and desire itself is changeable and apt to give rise only to further dissatisfactions. But is it really something to mope about? Thinking concretely, suppose we desire a good dinner, and enjoy it. Should it poison the enjoyment to reflect that it is fleeting (we won't enjoy this dinner forever), or that the desire for a good dinner is changeable (soon we won't feel hungry), or only temporarily satisfied (we will want dinner again tomorrow)? It is not as if things would be better if we always wanted a dinner, or if having got a dinner once we never wanted one again, or if the one dinner went on for a whole lifetime. None of those things seem remotely desirable, so why make a fuss about it not being like that?

If the pessimistic mood does get into focus, it is apt to concentrate on problematic desires, such as the desire for wealth, or, perhaps, erotic desire. It is easy to argue that these are intrinsically unsatisfiable, at least for some people some of the time. The achievement of wealth often brings either the demand for more, or the inability to enjoy what we have. Our well-being can certainly be

destroyed by poverty, but the briefest look at the lives of the rich does not suggest that well-being is increased without end by further riches. Many people in the world are much richer than any people used to be, but are they happier? Relevant social measures, such as suicide rates, certainly do not suggest so. The walled and guarded ghettos of the rich, such as American Governor's Club enclaves, scarcely testify to happy, enviable lives. And, following Veblen, we might expect that increasing national income simply raises the baseline from which vanity requires the rich to distinguish themselves. This is one of the dismal things about the dismal science of economics.



7. Richard Hamilton, 'What Is It that Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?'