



The Bed of Procrustes: Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

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By the author of the modern classic *The Black Swan*, this collection of aphorisms and meditations expresses his major ideas in ways you least expect.

The Bed of Procrustes takes its title from Greek mythology: the story of a man who made his visitors fit his bed to perfection by either stretching them or cutting their limbs. It represents Taleb's view of modern civilization's hubristic side effects—modifying humans to satisfy technology, blaming reality for not fitting economic models, inventing diseases to sell drugs, defining intelligence as what can be tested in a classroom, and convincing people that employment is not slavery.

Playful and irreverent, these aphorisms will surprise you by exposing self-delusions you have been living with but never recognized.

With a rare combination of pointed wit and potent wisdom, Taleb plows through human illusions, contrasting the classical values of courage, elegance, and erudition against the modern diseases of nerdiness, philistinism, and phoniness.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Bed of Procrustes: Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms Details

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Nassim Nicholas Taleb**

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Ryan Holiday says

I would have said it's incredibly unlikely that someone could put together a book of aphorisms during their lifetime that would be worth reading. It's probably fitting that Taleb could beat those odds. This book is theme around the myth of Procrustes--an ancient figure who would stretch or maim overnight guests so they could fit into his bed (instead of, you know, fitting the bed to them). It's kind of ironic that Taleb, coiner of the Narrative Fallacy, would put an overarching theme in a collection of saying, but if it works, it works. My favorite it probably his line about preoccupation with productivity being the obstacle to a poetic or robust life. He also has one that reminds me of the lyrics to Little Boxes. If you like books of aphorisms, try The moral sayings of Publius Syrus: A Roman slave. From the Latin (which I recommended here), Collected Maxims and Other Reflections (Oxford World's Classics) and of course, Meditations

Alina says

Written after The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable, which deals with unexpected and unpredictable life changing events, this book is made of aphorisms about the paradox of fitting everything in a certain individual's (or, quite often, society's) limited patterns and opinions, instead of an unbiased vision of the real facts. Some highly interesting, some not so much, overall a good spend of my time.

Note on the Romanian edition from Curtea Veche publishing house, translated by Cornelia Dumitru: I found the translation poor, unnecessarily complicated, some of the aphorisms being easier to grasp in English (I searched for the original ones). I think that the moment one understands better an idea in a foreign language than in his/hers native one, the translator pretty much failed.

Brian says

A rare book. It probably has the highest usefulness to character ratio of any book I've found. Not to say that it's super useful, but it is very short.

The book is the equivalent of poring over Taleb's blog and twitter account for the past 10 years and picking out the stuff that is worth sharing. I can imagine the author's notebook that he kept witty and interesting-to-him stuff marked up, over and over, front and back of every page and margin. I think it would be interesting to read the notes and editor's remarks for this book, if I had the time.

As it is, you get a few hundred aphorisms. The author picked them all with the likely purpose to share wisdom with the world, but I suspect with the practical, and likely hopeless, hope to reduce the number of idiots that he has to deal with on a personal level. As such, about 50% are only applicable to Taleb, 30% are wrong, 10% are funny, 25% are right, and 10% are useful and 5% are wisdom. I'm not sure which ones though.

It's rare to peek into the mind of someone you respect and are interested in. This book probably gives more

of a sense of the person than his actual printed work. And it's quicker than the impossible task of sitting down with an author for hours (where I'm sure I wouldn't be a good enough interviewer to actually find out what I want to know anyway). I kept wondering why Taleb wrote this. I almost think it's a Last Starfighter-like test to find a woman somewhere in the world who will, after reading this, understand him well enough to flatter him so well that he won't know he is being flattered.

I think I would like if all the great essayists were able to write something like this once every decade. But then I have no way of filtering out all the versions that should be ignored. There are probably a ton of these locked away in practical, wise and intelligent men's desks but they have no reason to share with the world.

Aside from all the curiosity that is sated, this book overall is useful and helpful. You don't get too many books that help you work through life and you definitely don't get many that clock in under 100 pages and are full of tweet-length aphorisms. Although you could read the entire thing in 15 minutes if you were in a race, this is something that you will read in 30 minutes 100 times over and over.

My favorite line is "If my detractors knew me better they would hate me even more."

Marcus says

Taleb is fascinating. How does a guy who relentlessly attacks the credibility of economists and academics get invited to speak in front of them so often? He's utterly arrogant and abrasive, yet he has a certain appeal that is difficult to explain. Part of it undoubtedly stems from his main idea that revolves around "how we deal, and should deal, with what we don't know." It is interesting and applicable to so many aspects of life; investing, politics, literature, philosophy and more and since it is, by his own admission, all he talks about, it makes him really interesting to listen to.

A lot of his aphorisms deal with what it takes to be clever, witty, magnificent, generous, erudite and humble, himself being the implied example for each of these. Through his arrogance though, there seems to be a certain insecurity about him. He constantly criticizes people who are not like him (anyone who works out in gyms or uses technology heavily, all economists, people who are over 30 and still employed or not wealthy etc.) while justifying his own lifestyle. His wisdom often feels more like a recipe for how to live like Taleb rather than any transcendental truth. Still, there are plenty of good ones, for example:

"There is no intermediate state between ice and water but there is one between life and death: employment"

"You don't become completely free just by avoiding to be a slave; you also need to avoid becoming a master."

"There are two types of people: those who try to win and those who try to win arguments. They are never the same."

"Every social association that is not face to face is injurious to your health."

"Randomness is indistinguishable from complicated, undetected, and undetectable order; but order itself is indistinguishable from artful randomness."

"They agree that chess training only improves chess skills but disagree that classroom training (almost) only

improves classroom skills."

So some are good, pithy, insightful etc.; what an aphorism should be, and while the book is worth reading, it's pretty hit or miss, far from the master of the aphorism, Nicolás Gómez Dávila.

Yash Sinojia says

This was a book having a Postface instead of a Preface.. A beautiful book full of Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms.

The story of 'The Bed of Procrustes' (a Greek myth) is metaphorized in every aphorism in this book.

We humans, facing limits of knowledge, and things do not observe, the unseen and the unknown, resolve the tension by squeezing life and the world into crisp commoditized ideas, reductive categories, specific vocabularies, and prepackaged narratives, which, on the occasion, has explosive consequences.

Our minds are not good at handling non-anecdotal and tend to be swayed by vivid imagery, making the media distort our view of the world.

The book was different and great as the Aphorisms are one of the earliest literary forms, there were various various philosophies of Taleb's own and various others so there was some controversial parts.. but it's OK. I recommend it.

Anca says

The Bed of Procrustes is a beautiful collection of aphorisms, best absorbed if already familiar with Nassim Nicholas Taleb through some of his other books. They all touch upon uncertainty and the limitations of knowledge (and the qualities of the unknown) but this one is special. This is the treat, the one you'll want to read over and over and ponder. While there is little to ponder in Fooled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets (it is either true - hence, to be absorbed, assimilated and other forms of literary osmosis - or untrue - therefore discarded and granted a one star rating on Goodreads) because of its discourse (it's pretty scientific, with propositions and arguments), Bed of Procrustes is more akin to a painting or poetry: you sometimes have the nagging feeling that maybe you didn't "get it".

PGR Nair says

Aphorisms Galore!

If for any literary fan, the country Lebanon brings to mind the tender, lyrical and mystical poet Khalil Gibran, we have another compatriot from Lebanon to remember for his scathing, caustic, intelligent and often cynical observations on our society. He is none other than Nicholas Nassim Taleb, the Lebanese American essayist and scholar whose main works focus on problems of randomness, probability and uncertainty.

His 2007 book "The Black Swan" was described in a review by Sunday Times as one of the twelve most

influential books since World War II. For centuries, Europeans believed that all swans were white — until black swans were discovered in Australia. A possibly minor moment in ornithology, but one that for Nassim Nicholas Taleb perfectly illustrates how poorly our past experience of the world can prepare us for sudden, unexpected, epochal events. “The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable”, gave rise to a new name for these moments, both positive black swans (the rise of the Internet) and negative ones (the 9/11 attacks). Taleb has argued that much of the recent market turmoil has been due to the inability of financial risk models to account for such black swans.

Born in Lebanon, he weathered the first few years of the civil war in the late 1970s reading philosophy and mathematics -- from Plato to Poincaré -- in his family's basement. Taleb received his bachelor and master in science degrees from the University of Paris. He holds an MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and a PhD in Management Science from the University of Paris . Taleb became a full-time scholar and essayist in 2006 , as a university professor. He is currently Distinguished Professor of Risk Engineering at Polytechnic Institute of New York University. His earlier books such as “Fooled by Randomness “ and “The Black Swan” made it clear to the world that Taleb is a first class thinker who can know, to paraphrase one his sayings, a priori what most can only learn a posteriori.

The above book titled “The Bed of Procrustes “ containing Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms is annoyingly brilliant. I am aware of no other intellect who can offer truisms in such an offensive, condescending, righteous, and elitist manner while also endearing, educating, enlightening, and inspiring. The one word that has always come to mind when I think of Nassim Taleb is arrogant but somehow one finds a sneaky pleasure in accepting his arrogance. He is observations concern superiority, wealth, suckerdom, academia, modernity, technology and the all-purpose, ignorant “they” who dare to doubt him.

“The Bed of Procrustes,” is intentionally harsh. As he reminds readers in a brief introduction, the Procrustes of Greek mythology was the cruel and ill-advised fool who stretched or shortened people to make them fit his inflexible bed. Mr. Taleb’s new book addresses the latter-day ways in which “we humans, facing limits of knowledge, and things we do not observe, the unseen and the unknown, resolve the tension by squeezing life and the world into crisp commoditized ideas, reductive categories, specific vocabularies, and prepackaged narratives, which, on the occasion, has explosive consequences.”

The book offers readers a robust insight into Taleb’s world view and process which is ultimately quite useful for those who seek to find a deeper understanding of the complex world we live in. It may not be surprising that this deeper understanding that Taleb possesses stems from a pursuit that is at odds with the modern, scientific, technological approach to knowledge, but is rooted in one’s ability to remove oneself from constraints, biases, artificial effort, and political and societal norms.

Taleb’s aphorisms manage to tell us how to generate ideas without thinking, achieve progress without working, and reveal mysteries without looking. His targets include fields which rely heavily on the idea that what we know is more robust than what we don’t (economics, medicine, academia), those which rely on popular acceptance to be considered influential (politics, journalism, literature) and all who are enslaved by a predictable existence. The aphorisms place a high premium on learning through opening oneself to the universe while knowing how to filter out the noise and avoiding the misidentification of signal. Importantly, many of Taleb’s saying properly identify error not as something that should be considered shameful or feared, but used as an asset from which we can gain insight.

The Bed of Procrustes will serve as a useful resource for those who see the power of short quotes to convey big ideas and those who wish to develop an approach towards understanding what is true before it slaps you in the face.

Here are some insightful samplers from the book:

“Usually, what we call a “good listener” is someone with skillfully polished indifference.”

“There is no intermediate state between ice and water but there is one between life and death: employment.”

“Hatred is much harder to fake than love. You hear of fake love; never of fake hate.”

“If your anger decreases with time, you did injustice; if it increases, you suffered injustice.”

“You will get the most attention from those who hate you. No friend, no admirer and no partner will flatter you with as much curiosity.”

“Games were created to give nonheroes the illusion of winning. In real life, you don’t know who really won or lost (except too late), but you can tell who is heroic and who is not.”

“Academia is to knowledge what prostitution is to love; close enough on the surface but, to the nonsucker, not exactly the same thing.”

“You remember e-mails you sent that were not answered better than e-mails you did not answer.”

“People reserve standard compliments for those who do not threaten their pride; the others they often praise by calling “arrogant.”

“If you lie to me, keep lying; don’t hurt me by suddenly telling the truth”

“True humility is when you can surprise yourself more than others; the rest is either shyness or good marketing.”

“Meditation is a way to be narcissistic without hurting anyone.”

“The calamity of the information age is that the toxicity of data increases much faster than its benefits.”

“The stock market, in brief: participants are calmly waiting in line to be slaughtered while thinking it is for a Broadway show.”

“The weak shows his strength and hides his weaknesses; the magnificent exhibits his weaknesses like ornaments”

“Half the people lie with their lips; the other half with their tears.”

“If you know, in the morning, what your day looks like with any precision, you are a little bit dead—the more precision, the more dead you are.”

Mr. Taleb is so calculatedly abrasive in this smart, attention-grabbing little book that he achieves his main objective. “A good maxim,” he writes, “allows you to have the last word without even starting a conversation.”

Khalid Alnaqbi says

Full of wisdom .. and egoism.

Saeed Ramazany says

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Nirav Savaliya says

A Book full of thought provoking aphorisms, makes you think more and more on all the random activities (which you think are random but to some extent aren't!) that takes place around you everyday. This book changes how you look at people, government, organizations in a completely different way. Absolutely amazing finale, explains you why this book is called "The Bed of Procrustes" and why it matters!

Some of his ideas are quite contradictory with mine and at some point I realized that he thinks he's the only person with traits like erudition, elegance and courage.

Sabra Embury says

Taleb received a \$4 million advance to write this book of aphorisms as a follow-up to *the Black Swan*.

Some of my favorites:

Academia is to knowledge what prostitution is to love; close enough on the surface but, to the nonsucker, not exactly the same thing.

I suspect that they put Socrates to death because there is something terribly unattractive, alienating and nonhuman in thinking with too much clarity.

Education makes the wise slightly wiser, but it makes the fool vastly more dangerous.

If you know in the morning, what your day looks like with any precision, you are a little bit dead--the more precision, the more dead you are.

There is no intermediate state between ice and water but there is one between life and death: employment.

Procrastination is the soul rebelling against entrapment.

They will envy you for your success, for your wealth, for your intelligence, for your looks, for your status--but rarely for your wisdom.

Many of these aphorisms are interesting. A lot of them are specific and esoteric; a retaliation against critics in Academia, economics, the working class and anyone who might think they're smart for getting good grades or scoring high on an IQ test. Taleb's aphorisms are anti-technology, anti-nerd and anti-making a living with a job that draws a salary. The dependence is what he's against, the repetition, an unstimulated life filled with monotonous patterns, notions of false humility, false models, and sports.

Under a section titled ETHICS, Taleb says: Avoid calling heroes those who had no other choice. Some will call him "harsh" for a statement like that; especially firemen, moms who save children from burning buildings, guys who fix flats on the sides of roads for a smile and thank you, and especially Bruce Willis because he's terrible in romantic comedies. Others will say: maybe he's talking about himself and is trying to be humble without seeming humble because he thinks he's saving the world with his intelligence. Those people have too much time, and empathy, on their hands.

Whatever Taleb is trying to say, and whoever he's trying to say it to, we might never officially know. What we do know is that he has the last laugh receiving \$4 million to have a few hundred twitter posts published into a hardcover book of philosophical and political aphorisms. It's a best seller, too. A best seller which I bought, read, and am now writing a review about. Call me a sucker, or call me curious, just please don't call me a hero.

Leopold Benedict says

Taleb's not at his best here. He tried a bit too hard. Still, there are some gems.

Kavity says

"One of the problems with social networks is that it is getting harder and harder for others to complain about you behind your back."

Great read!

Jon Cone says

This book of aphorisms has an introduction, in which the myth of Procrustes is told, and concludes with an essay which begins, "The general theme of my work is the limitation of human knowledge." Both introduction and concluding essay strike me as special pleading. Aphorisms need no defending. They stand on their own, if they are good. Too often Taleb's aphorisms fail because they lack the necessary iron, fire,

mystery. They seldom surprise. In this book, Taleb accepts the traditional concerns of the aphorist and contributes some few others particular to him. He has a special dislike for economists, for example. (Fair enough.) And nerds. (Aren't we all, to some extent, in this age of omnipresent digital technology and oppressive pop culture, nerds? Do people even use that term in a non-ironic way anymore?)

"Some people are only funny when they try to be serious." Well, yes, that happens sometimes, I suppose.

"The opposite of manliness isn't cowardice; it's technology." Should we remind Taleb that the hammer is an instance of technology?

"If someone gives you more than one reason why he wants the job, don't hire him." Let me get this straight: if someone has thought deeply about his qualifications for a job and finds himself suited to it in many ways; and he can articulate this to an interviewer, we should consider this sufficient reason for NOT giving him the job?

"No author should be considered as having failed until he starts teaching others about writing." The cliche that only lousy writers, 'failed writers', teach creative writing is easily refuted by the list of brilliant American writers who have, at one time, taught at American universities. Such nonsense.

We should also understand how difficult it is for writers to make enough money from their writing and laud them for putting a roof over their heads, providing food, shelter, clothing for their families and so forth.

"At a panel in Moscow, I watched the economist Edmund Phelps, who got the 'Nobel' (sic) for writings no one reads, theories no one uses, and lectures no one understands." This isn't even an aphorism. It's merely an expression of professional jealousy.

"Someone who says, I am busy" is either declaring incompetence (and lack of control of his his life) or trying to get rid of you." Or he's busy AND trying to get rid of you. (The incompetent is rarely busy.)

Of course, there are a few interesting aphorisms contained here, though they are few, far between, without enough weight to redeem.

Santhosh says

Nassim Taleb is definitely not the sort I'd like to get to know personally as I don't agree with about half of his life philosophies. However, in my best Voltaire voice, while I disapprove of what he says, I will defend to the death his right to print it in books and make millions off them. As with such collections, there is a mix of some fantastic and deep aphorisms while there were also a few that made me go 'meh'. Overall though, once you overcome the fact that he keeps calling everyone incompetent and an idiot to boot, it is a fun enough read.

I should also mention that reading a book of aphorisms from a contemporary is a bit unsettling. When we read such quotes and aphorisms about life and debunking modernity and moral wisdom, more often than not they'd be by ages old philosophers or from literature. Here we have a contemporary spewing standalone quotes ripping though our own lives and times.

In the great tension between rationalism (how we would like things to be so they make sense to us) and

empiricism (how things are), we have been blaming the world for not fitting the beds of “rational” models, have tried to change humans to fit technology, fudged our ethics to fit our needs for employment, asked economic life to fit the theories of economists, and asked human life to squeeze into some narrative.
