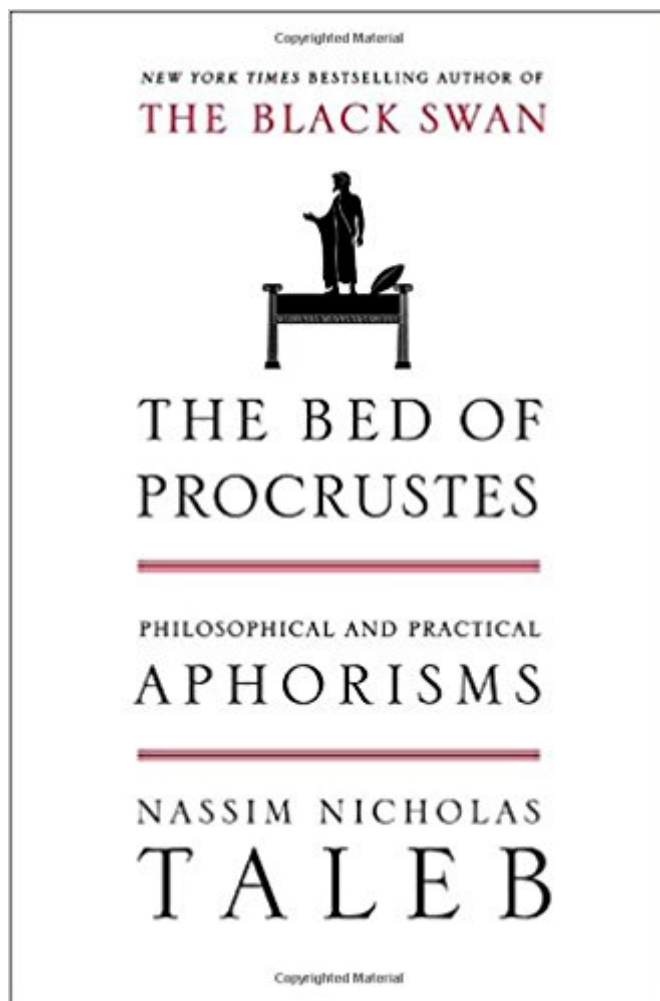


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The Bed Of Procrustes: Philosophical And Practical Aphorisms (Incerto)



Synopsis

The Bed of Procrustes is a standalone book in Nassim Nicholas Taleb's landmark Incerto series, an investigation of opacity, luck, uncertainty, probability, human error, risk, and decision-making in a world we don't understand. The other books in the series are Fooled by Randomness, The Black Swan, and Antifragile. 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. "Taleb's crystalline nuggets of thought stand alone like esoteric poems." —Financial Times

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Praise for Nassim Nicholas Taleb – “The most prophetic voice of all.” – GQ – “The hottest thinker in the world.” – Bryan Appleyard, The Sunday Times (London) – “[Taleb writes] in a style that owes as much to Stephen Colbert as it does to Michel de Montaigne.” – The Wall Street Journal – “Idiosyncratically brilliant.” – Niall Ferguson, Los Angeles Times

Nassim Nicholas Taleb has devoted his life to problems of uncertainty, probability, and knowledge. He spent nearly two decades as a businessman and quantitative trader before becoming a full-time philosophical essayist and academic researcher in 2006. Although he spends most of his time in the intense seclusion of his study, or as a *flâneur* meditating in cafés, he is currently Distinguished Professor of Risk Engineering at New York University’s Polytechnic Institute. His main subject matter is “decision making under opacity” – that is, a map and a protocol on how we should live in a world we don’t understand. – Taleb’s books have been published in thirty-three languages.

Taleb has made a living showing lack of robustness and fragility in our use of knowledge. Indeed, Taleb’s discussion and prediction of the fiscal crises of the late aughts was totally earned, and he was aptly able to show in "The Black Swan" and "Fooled by Randomness" that epistemological humility was direly needed in both science reporting and economics. This book takes these trends and turns them into aphorism. Taking cues from Georg Christoph Lichtenberg and E.M. Cioran more than Nietzsche, Taleb’s aphorisms are pithy and common sensical. Indeed, perhaps, often too common sensical. This is short book, easy to read, and even when you disagree with Taleb, he is humorous enough not to lose you. Indeed, I find his aphoristic writing to be easier to read stylistically than his more journalistic and extended think piece works. In many senses, these aphorisms prove that Taleb is a practical philosopher, but not necessarily a precise or consistent one. Yet the theme of the need of epistemic humility and the robustness of moral and aesthetic visions versus knowledge claims dominate the value.

Aphorisms are a classical way to present and convey in a nutshell wisdom based on contemplation and experience, as illustrated by the maxims of La Rochefoucauld and aphorism of Nietzsche. Taleb, in-between his books on The Black Swan and Antifragility, which I regard as very important, put together in this brief volume a short collection of aphorism. The title, The Bed of Procrustes, – presents an important idea, well presented in the Procrustes and the

Postface: “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” (p. xii). And “Because our minds need to reduce information, we are more likely to try to squeeze a phenomenon into the Procrustean bed of a crisp and known category (amputating the unknown)” (p. 105); followed by “Our mental architecture is at an increasing mismatch with the world in which we live, leading to what the author appropriately calls “epistemic arrogance” imagining the territory as fitting his map” (p. 106). These are important insights worthy of much attention, all the more so with humanity moving into an era of metamorphosis posing much that is unprecedented and also inconceivable. The main body of the book includes about 300 aphorisms, some more striking, such as on randomness (p. 58); and some less so, as on Latin, mathematics and wisdom (p. 79). My recommendation is to read this short book (114 pages including the preface) in one sitting, which should take about one hour, marking select aphorisms as requiring deeper pondering. And then consider these at leisure as stimuli for thinking, so as to benefit from their quanta of wisdom. Professor Yehezkel Dror The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Once again, Taleb is presenting the reader with some brilliant observations on life, process, and product! Having read "The Black Swan" and "Fooled by Randomness, "The Bed of Procrustes" offers the reader additional wisdoms, from which to draw a parallel between current challenges, hypothetical solutions, and that "grey space" in between. To wit: "The calamity of the information age is that the toxicity of data increases much faster than its benefits." Deeply reflective, subtly humorous, and thoroughly entertaining, it will become another Taleb book you can share with friends, colleagues--even relatives, on "both sides of the aisle!"

It takes an incredible amount of skill to write aphorisms well, and Nassim Taleb undoubtedly has that skill. It's for that reason that I've read this book several times now (and the Twitter feed where many of these aphorisms originated). In the book, Taleb explains that aphorisms lose their charm whenever explained. "My best definition of a nerd:", he writes, "someone who asks you to explain an aphorism." If you don't understand an aphorism in this book, I'd suggest reading it again more slowly. While Taleb's other books are wonderful, this book will always be one of my favorites. As Karl Kraus put it: "Someone who can write aphorisms should not fritter away his time writing essays."

Taleb has a lot of great wisdom in here that I wish I would have encountered much earlier in life. This is a book I will be sharing with my children some day. It makes a lot of wise perspectives very digestible, and easily approached/absorbed. I think his phrasing and careful choice of words is also a great reminder to be as succinct and expedient as one can. I have been re-visiting this book frequently since I got it, and will likely continue to do so until it's so worn I need to order another copy. This author definitely takes a more confrontational and slightly abrasive stance to some naturally controversial subject matter in his other works. HOWEVER, do not allow the arguments and perception of his attitudes in regards to his other professional endeavors turn you away from this work. Regardless of your beliefs or conclusions about his views on statistical modeling and economics, this work is brilliant, brief, and well worth the time and money you would spend on it. I'm actually going to be ordering multiple copies as gifts for colleagues and close friends.

This book is all aphorisms bunched into chapters by topic. So no one story line or idea to follow as in his other books. At times I played a game trying to read the first part of an aphorism and guess the rest. Never got it. Being Taleb's work they are much cleverer than I am and very thought provoking. Short and enjoyable reading.

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