

THE BED OF PROCRUSTES

Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms

Nassim Nicholas Taleb



R A N D O M H O U S E

ALSO BY NASSIM NICHOLAS TALEB

Fooled by Randomness

The Black Swan

NASSIM NICHOLAS TALEB

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PROCRUSTES

PHILOSOPHICAL AND
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About the Author

Procrustes, in Greek mythology, was the cruel owner of a small estate in Corydalus in Attica on the way between Athens and Eleusis, where the mystery rites were performed. Procrustes had a peculiar sense of hospitality: he abducted travelers, provided them with a generous dinner, then invited them to spend the night in a rather special bed. He wanted the bed to fit the traveler to perfection. Those who were too tall had their legs chopped off with a sharp hatchet; those who were too short were stretched (his name was said to be Damastes, or Polyphemon, but he was nicknamed Procrustes, which meant “the stretcher”).

In the purest of poetic justice, Procrustes was hoisted by his own petard. One of the travelers happened to be the fearless Theseus, who slayed the Minotaur later in his heroic career. After the customary dinner, Theseus made Procrustes lie in his own bed. Then, to make him fit in it to the customary perfection, he decapitated him. Theseus thus followed Hercules’s method of paying back in kind.

In more sinister versions (such as the one in Pseudo-Apollodorus’s *Bibliotheca*), Procrustes owned two beds, one small, one large; he made short victims lie in the large bed, and the tall victims in the short one.

Every aphorism here is about a Procrustean bed of sorts—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. Further, we seem unaware of this backward fitting, much like tailors who take great pride in delivering the perfectly fitting suit—but do so by surgically altering the limbs of their customers. For instance, few realize that we are changing the brains of schoolchildren through medication in order to make them adjust to the curriculum, rather than the reverse.

Since aphorisms lose their charm whenever explained, I only hint for now at the central theme of this book—I relegate further discussions to the postface. These are stand-alone compressed thoughts revolving around my main idea of *how we deal, and should deal, with what we don’t know*, matters more deeply discussed in my books *The Black Swan* and *Foiled by Randomness*.*

* My use of the metaphor of the Procrustes bed isn’t just about putting something in the wrong box; it’s mostly the inverse operation of changing the wrong variable, here the person rather than the bed. Note that every failure of what we call “wisdom” (coupled with technical proficiency) can be reduced to a Procrustean bed situation.

The person you are the most afraid to contradict is yourself.

—

An idea starts to be interesting when you get scared of taking it to its logical conclusion.

—

Pharmaceutical companies are better at inventing diseases that match existing drugs, rather than inventing drugs to match existing diseases.

—

To understand the liberating effect of asceticism, consider that losing all your fortune is much less painful than losing only half of it.

—

To bankrupt a fool, give him information.

—

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

—

In science you need to understand the world; in business you need others to misunderstand it.

—

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.

—

The test of originality for an idea is not the absence of one single predecessor but the presence of multiple but incompatible ones.

—

Modernity's double punishment is to make us both age prematurely and live longer.

—

An erudite is someone who displays less than he knows; a journalist or consultant, the opposite.

—

Your brain is most intelligent when you don't instruct it on what to do—something people who take showers discover on occasion.

—

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

—

I wonder if those who advocate generosity for its rewards notice the inconsistency, or if what they call generosity is an attractive investment strategy.*

—

Those who think religion is about "belief" don't understand religion, and don't understand belief.

—

Work destroys your soul by stealthily invading your brain during the hours not officially

spent working; be selective about professions.

—

In nature we never repeat the same motion; in captivity (office, gym, commute, sports), life is just repetitive-stress injury. No randomness.

—

Using, as an excuse, others' failure of common sense is in itself a failure of common sense.

—

Compliance with the straitjacket of narrow (Aristotelian) logic and avoidance of fatal inconsistencies are not the same thing.

—

Economics cannot digest the idea that the collective (and the aggregate) are disproportionately less predictable than individuals.

—

Don't talk about "progress" in terms of longevity, safety, or comfort before comparing zoo animals to those in the wilderness.

—

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 and employment.

—

You have a calibrated life when most of what you fear has the titillating prospect of adventure.

Procrastination is the soul rebelling against entrapment.

Nobody wants to be perfectly transparent; not to others, certainly not to himself.

* I need a qualifier here. There are exceptions, but there are also many known cases in which a prostitute falls in love with a client.

* A generous act is precisely what should aim at no reward, neither financial nor social nor emotional; deontic (unconditional observance of duties), not utilitarian (aiming at some collective—or even individual—gains in welfare). There is nothing wrong with “generous” acts that elicit a “warm glow” or promise salvation to the giver; these are not to be linguistically conflated with deontic actions, those emanating from pure sense of duty.

The best revenge on a liar is to convince him that you believe what he said.

—

When we want to do something while unconsciously certain to fail, we seek advice so we can blame someone else for the failure.

—

It is harder to say *no* when you really mean it than when you don't.

—

Never say *no* twice if you mean it.

—

Your reputation is harmed the most by what you say to defend it.

—

The only objective definition of aging is when a person starts to talk about aging.

—

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

—

Most of what they call humility is successfully disguised arrogance.

—

If you want people to read a book, tell them it is overrated.

–

You never win an argument until they attack your person.

–

Nothing is more permanent than “temporary” arrangements, deficits, truces, and relationships; and nothing is more temporary than “permanent” ones.

–

The most painful moments are not those we spend with uninteresting people; rather, they are those spent with uninteresting people trying hard to be interesting.

–

Hatred is love with a typo somewhere in the computer code, correctable but very hard to find.

–

I wonder whether a bitter enemy would be jealous if he discovered that I hated someone else.

–

The characteristic feature of the loser is to bemoan, in general terms, mankind’s flaws, biases, contradictions, and irrationality—without exploiting them for fun and profit.

–

The test of whether you really liked a book is if you reread it (and how many times); the test of whether you really liked someone’s company is if you are ready to meet him again and again—the rest is spin, or that variety of sentiment now called self-esteem.

–

We ask “why is he rich (or poor)?” not “why isn’t he richer (or poorer)?”; “why is the crisis

so deep?” not “why isn’t it deeper?”

–

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

–

The opposite of manliness isn’t cowardice; it’s technology.

–

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

–

It is the appearance of inconsistency, and not its absence, that makes people attractive.

–

You remember emails you sent that were not answered better than emails that you did not answer.

–

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

–

Since Cato the Elder, a certain type of maturity has shown up when one starts blaming the new generation for “shallowness” and praising the previous one for its “values.”

–

It is as difficult to avoid bugging others with advice on how to exercise and other health matters as it is to stick to an exercise schedule.

–

By praising someone for his lack of defects you are also implying his lack of virtues.

–

When she shouts that what you did was unforgivable, she has already started to forgive you.

–

Being unimaginative is only a problem when you are easily bored.

–

We call narcissistic those individuals who behave as if they were the central residents of the world; those who do exactly the same in a set of two we call lovers or, better, “blessed by love.”

–

Friendship that ends was never one; there was at least one sucker in it.

–

Most people fear being without audiovisual stimulation because they are too repetitive when they think and imagine things on their own.

–

Unrequited hate is vastly more diminishing for the self than unrequited love. You can't reach it by reciprocating.

–

For the compassionate, sorrow is more easily displaced by another sorrow than by joy.

–

Wisdom in the young is as unattractive as frivolity in the elderly.

–

Some people are only funny when they try to be serious.

—

It is difficult to stop the impulse to reveal secrets in conversation, as if information had the desire to live and the power to multiply.

It is a very recent disease to mistake the unobserved for the nonexistent; but some are plagued with the worse disease of mistaking the unobserved for the unobservable.

—

Asking science to explain life and vital matters is equivalent to asking a grammarian to explain poetry.

—

You exist if and only if you are free to do things without a visible objective, with no justification and, above all, outside the dictatorship of someone else's narrative.

You cannot express the holy in terms made for the profane, but you can discuss the profane in terms made for the holy.

—

Atheism (materialism) means treating the dead as if they were unborn. I won't. By accepting the sacred, you reinvent religion.

—

If you can't spontaneously detect (without analyzing) the difference between sacred and profane, you'll never know what religion means. You will also never figure out what we commonly call art. You will never understand anything.

—

People used to wear ordinary clothes weekdays and formal attire on Sunday. Today it is the exact reverse.

—

To mark a separation between holy and profane, I take a ritual bath after any contact, or correspondence (even emails), with consultants, economists, Harvard Business School professors, journalists, and those in similarly depraved pursuits; I then feel and act purified from the profane until the next episode.

—

The book is the only medium left that hasn't been corrupted by the profane: everything else on your eyelids manipulates you with an ad.*

—

You can replace lies with truth; but myth is only displaced with a narrative.

—

The sacred is all about unconditionals; the profane is all about conditionals.†

—

The source of the tragic in history is in mistaking someone else's unconditional for conditional—and the reverse.

—

Restaurants get you in with food to sell you liquor; religions get you in with belief to sell you rules (e.g., avoid debt). People can understand the notion of God, not unexplained rules, interdicts, and categorical heuristics.

—

One categorical: it is easier to fast than diet. You cannot be “slightly” kosher or halal by only eating a small portion of ham.

—

To be completely cured of newspapers, spend a year reading the previous week's newspaper.

* A comment here. After a long diet from the media, I came to realize that there is nothing that's not (clumsily) trying to sell you something. I only trust my library. There is nothing wrong with the ownership of the physical book as a manifestation of human weakness, desire to show off, peacock tail-style signaling of superiority, it's the commercial agenda outside the book that corrupts.

† For instance, many people said to be unbribeable are just too expensive.

Success is becoming in middle adulthood what you dreamed to be in late childhood. The rest comes from loss of control.

—

The opposite of success isn't failure; it is name-dropping.

—

Modernity needs to understand that being rich and becoming rich are not mathematically, personally, socially, and ethically the same thing.

—

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

—

Fortune punishes the greedy by making him poor and the very greedy by making him rich.

—

Quite revealing of human preferences that more suicides come from shame or loss of financial and social status than medical diagnoses.

—

“Wealthy” is meaningless and has no robust absolute measure; use instead the subtractive measure “unwealth,” that is, the difference, at any point in time, between what you have and what you would like to have.

—

Older people are most beautiful when they have what is lacking in the young: poise, erudition, wisdom, phronesis, and this post-heroic absence of agitation.

—

I went to a happiness conference; researchers looked very unhappy.

—

What fools call “wasting time” is most often the best investment.

—

Decline starts with the replacement of dreams with memories and ends with the replacement of memories with other memories.

—

You want to avoid being disliked without being envied or admired.

—

Read nothing from the past one hundred years; eat no fruits from the past one thousand years; drink nothing from the past four thousand years (just wine and water); but talk to an ordinary man over forty. A man without a heroic bent starts dying at the age of thirty.

—

Some pursuits are much duller from the inside. Even piracy, they say.

—

Karl Marx, a visionary, figured out that you can control a slave much better by convincing him he is an employee.

—

Catholic countries had more serial monogamy than today, but without the need for divorce—life expectancy was short; marriage duration was much, much shorter.

—

The fastest way to become rich is to socialize with the poor; the fastest way to become poor is to socialize with the rich.

—

You will be civilized on the day you can spend a long period doing nothing, learning nothing and improving nothing, without feeling the slightest amount of guilt.

—

Someone who says “I am busy” is either declaring incompetence (and lack of control of his life) or trying to get rid of you.

—

The difference between slaves in Roman and Ottoman days and today’s employees is that slaves did not need to flatter their boss.

—

You are rich if and only if money you refuse tastes better than money you accept.

—

For most, success is the harmful passage from the camp of the hating to the camp of the hated.

—

To see if you like where you are, without the chains of dependence, check if you are as happy returning as you were leaving.

—

The difference between love and happiness is that those who talk about love tend to be in love, but those who talk about happiness tend to be not happy.

—

Modernity: we created youth without heroism, age without wisdom, and life without grandeur.

—

You can tell how uninteresting a person is by asking him whom he finds interesting.

—

The Web is an unhealthy place for someone hungry for attention.

—

I wonder if anyone ever measured the time it takes, at a party, before a mildly successful stranger who went to Harvard makes others aware of it.

—

People focus on role models; it is more effective to find antimodels—people you don't want to resemble when you grow up.

—

It is a good practice to always apologize, except when you have done something wrong.

—

Preoccupation with efficacy is the main obstacle to a poetic, noble, elegant, robust, and heroic life.

—

Some, like most bankers, are so unfit for success that they look like dwarves dressed in giants' clothes.

—

Don't complain too loud about wrongs done you; you may give ideas to your less imaginative enemies.

—

Most feed their obsessions by trying to get rid of them.

—

It is as difficult to change someone's opinions as it is to change his tastes.

—

I have the fondest memories of time spent in places called ugly, the most boring ones & places called scenic.

—

Fitness is certainly the sign of strength, but outside of natural stimuli the drive to acquire fitness can signal some deep incurable weakness.

—

Charm is the ability to insult people without offending them; nerdiness the reverse.

—

Those who do not think that employment is systemic slavery are either blind or employed.

—

They are born, then put in a box; they go home to live in a box; they study by ticking boxes; they go to what is called "work" in a box, where they sit in their cubicle box; they drive to the grocery store in a box to buy food in a box; they go to the gym in a box to sit in a box; they talk about thinking "outside the box"; and when they die they are put in a box. All boxes, Euclidian, geometrically smooth boxes.

—

Another definition of modernity: conversations can be more and more completely reconstructed with clips from other conversations taking place at the same time on the planet.

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