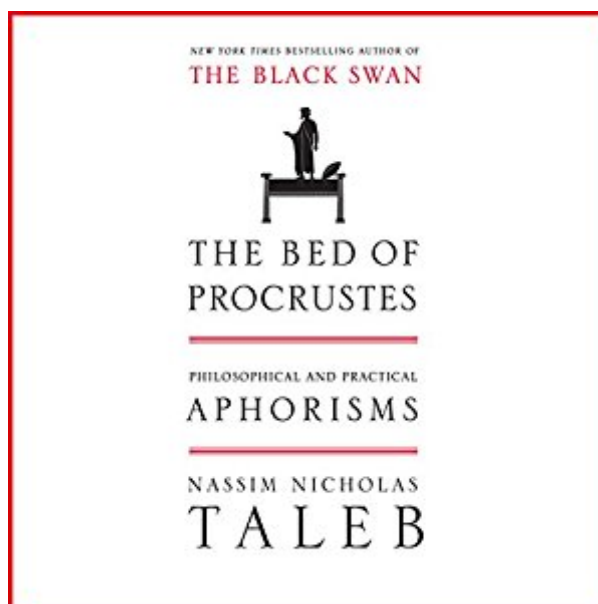


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The Bed Of Procrustes: Philosophical And Practical Aphorisms



Synopsis

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 Nassim Nicholas 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 2007 Nassim Taleb depicted the then current financial situation in America as a brittle house of cards. The subsequent economic crash and burn made his reputation as a seer, though Taleb would never claim prophecy in any form. "I know nothing about the future," he told the Long Now Foundation in February, 2008. He deals not with prediction, but with the unknown, or how humans fail to deal with the unknown, throw it under the carpet and pretend it doesn't exist. "The Black Swan" has become Taleb's symbol for the world's inherent unpredictability. The runaway best seller of the same name has seemingly redefined reality itself for some. From this point on the world looks

fuzzier. Taleb has since spread his Black Swan-ism everywhere, and people are listening. But how to follow up such a magnum opus? As if to prove the unpredictability of the world, Taleb releases a thin volume of... aphorisms. Could anyone have expected this? The previously verbose wizard of the unknown takes on the most laconic textual genre next to haiku. Didn't aphorisms go out with Cioran? Not to mention that the book's title sounds right out of 1890: "The Bed of Procrustes: Philosophical and Practical Aphorisms." In recent speeches Taleb has announced that he's now a philosopher. He apparently meant it. But he's still not predicting the future. This very tiny volume, readable in a short sitting, delineates Taleb's thought in a very different manner than his previous books. It also takes on some new subjects. A short introduction frames the aphorisms to follow. Here the charming tale of Procrustes gets juxtaposed with our modern sensibilities. But the comparison seems appropriate. Where Procrustes lopped the limbs off of his dinner guests so they fit perfectly into his bed, we moderns chop huge sections of reality away to fit our preconceived notions. In other words, we tend to ignore outliers, random events and unforeseen events with huge consequences. This expresses, though more poetically, many of the ideas included in his previous two books. Many of these ideas reappear in brief form throughout the book. For example, the section "Fooled By Randomness" (also the title of his first book), includes this passage: "The tragedy is that much of what you think is random is in your control and, what's worse, the opposite." Our Procrustean tendency to deny randomness appears throughout the book in blatant and subtle ways. But Taleb also takes on other subjects. For instance, in numerous places employment gets compared to slavery rather bluntly. Some will see the obvious parallels, others may find his examples overbearing. Taleb also talks about love, friendship, ethics, science, and other psychological and philosophical tidbits. Some are more successful than others. Some, such as "Never say no twice if you mean it" inspire nothing more than a furrowed brow and a shrug before moving on. Many are laugh out loud funny: "The opposite of success isn't failure; it is name-dropping." Still more contain real brilliance that may cause double-takes. Regardless, some lines will pass with little reaction and smack more of opinion than of insight. A few come off as bizarre. All in all, the book provides enough food for thought to justify a good solid read. Taleb does have some surprising ideas about reality and how people should spend their time. He definitely favors more free time over long hours at work. Not to mention his thoughts on academia and economics. In the end, this book defies absolute summary, like most aphoristic works. But the reading level remains simple throughout, and readers can browse without worrying too much about context (unlike Nietzsche's aphoristic works). "The Bed of Procrustes" definitely has its charms. Not only that, aphoristic writing really seems like an appropriate style for our modern attention spans.

Though wisdom often sounds quaint in a rapidly changing society. In any case don't expect this minute book to delineate Taleb's thought in full. Read "Black Swan" for that (get the recently released second edition). This one gives only a slight overview. Though fun and often intriguing, it does not delve into details. Again, those looking for depth should read "Black Swan" and those wanting more should pick up this one as an enjoyable breather. In the meantime, Taleb will likely keep ruminating. Hopefully something else akin to "Black Swan" will pop out of him. He presented one provocative thought in a recent talk that involved using nature as a model for economies. Nothing in nature is too big to fail, he claimed. One could take out nature's largest entity (say, a blue whale) and the entire system would not falter. Unlike our economy where one or two big players could level everything. Though he didn't give details, Taleb presented this as a possible economic model. He also summed up that "if economists ran nature we would all have one lung, etc." That does seem startlingly true. Perhaps emphasizing efficiency over strength weakens us in the long run. In any case, hopefully Taleb will develop such ideas in the future.

Taleb's book of 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. Based on his aphorism, it sounds like I'm not the only one: "People reserve standard compliments for those who do not threaten their pride; the others they often praise by calling 'arrogant.'" And he's right. Again. 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 of his sayings, a priori what most can only learn a posteriori. The Bed of Procrustes offers readers a much more 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 (short form writings which contain deep meaning) 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 avoid 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.

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