



THE BED OF
PROCRUSTES

PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRACTICAL
APHORISMS

NASSIM NICHOLAS
TALEB

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE BLACK SWAN

Procrustes

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 Polypemon, 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 on 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' method of paying back in kind.

In more sinister versions (such as the one in Pseudo-Apollodorus' *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 reverse¹.

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

¹ My use of the metaphor of the Procrustean bed isn't just about putting something in the wrong box; it's mostly that inverse operation of changing the wrong variable, here the person rather than the bed. Note that every case of failure of what we call "wisdom" (coupled with technical proficiency) can be reduced to a Procrustean bed situation.

TABLE

PROCRUSTES 2

Preludes4

Counter Narratives7

Matters Ontological.....11

The Sacred and the Profane11

Chance, Success, Happiness, and Stoicism13

Charming And Less Charming Sucker Problems.....19

Theseus, or, Living the Paleo Life.....21

The Republic of Letters24

The Universal and the Particular28

Fooled by Randomness29

Aesthetics.....31

Ethics33

Robustness and Fragility37

The Ludic Fallacy and Domain Dependence39

Epistemology and Subtractive Knowledge.....41

The Scandal of Prediction.....42

Being a Philosopher and Managing to Remain one43

Economic Life and Other Very Vulgar Subjects.....45

The Sage, The Weak, and the Magnificent49

The Implicit and the Explicit.....51

On The Varieties of Love and Nonlove.....53

The End55

POSTFACE 55

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 58

PRELUDES

•

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 thing².

•

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.

² 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.

•

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 and consultant, the opposite; most others fall somewhere in between.

•

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.

•

The opposite of manliness isn't cowardice; it's technology

•

Usually, what we call "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 to those who do not threaten their pride; the others 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.

•

Most Info-Media-Web-Newspaper types have a hard time swallowing the idea that knowledge is mostly reached by removing junk from peoples' heads.

•

Finer men tolerate others' small inconsistencies though not the large ones; the weak tolerate others' large inconsistencies though not small ones.

•

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

¹⁰ Say, Sarah Palin.

¹¹ The biggest error since Socrates has been to believe that lack of clarity is the source of all our ills, not the result of them.

ÆSTHETICS

•

Art is a one-sided conversation with the unobserved.

•

We become civilized only by knowing what to refrain from doing.

•

The genius of Benoit Mandelbrot is in achieving aesthetic simplicity without having recourse to smoothness.

•

Beauty is enhanced by unashamed irregularities; magnificence by a facade of blunder.

THE END

•

Platonic minds expect life to be like film, with defined terminal endings. APlatonic ones expect film to be like life and, except for few irreversible conditions such as death, distrust the terminal nature of all human declared endings.

PostFace

The general theme of my work is the limitations of human knowledge, and the charming and less charming errors and biases when working with matters that lie outside our field of observation, the unobserved and the unobservables —the unknown; what lies on the other side of the veil of opacity.

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), rather than suspend categorization, and make it tangible. Thanks to our detections of false patterns, along with real ones, what is random will appear less random and more certain —our overactive brains are more likely to impose the wrong, simplistic, narrative than no narrative at all²⁵.

The mind can be a wonderful tool for self-delusion —it was not designed to deal with complexity and nonlinear uncertainties. Counter to the common discourse, *more information means more delusions*: our detection of false patterns is growing faster and faster as a side effect of modernity and the information age: there is this mismatch between the messy randomness of the information-rich current world with complex interactions and our intuitions of events, derived in a simpler ancestral habitat —our mental architecture is at an increased mismatch with the world in which we live.

²⁵ This discounting of the unseen comes from the human "scorn of the abstract" (our minds are not good at handling the non-anecdotal, tend to be swayed by vivid imagery, making the media distort our view of the world).

This leads to sucker problems: when the map does not correspond to the territory, there is a certain category of fool —the overeducated, the academic, the journalist, the newspaper reader, the mechanistic "scientist", the pseudo-empiricist, those endowed with what I call "epistemic arrogance", this wonderful ability to discount what they did not see, the unobserved — who enter a state of denial, imagining the territory as fitting his map. More generally, the fool here is someone who does the wrong reduction for the sake of reduction, or removes something essential, cutting off the legs, or, better, part of the head of a visitor while insisting that he preserved his persona with 95% accuracy. Look around at the Procrustean beds we've created, some beneficial, some more questionable: regulations, top-down governments, academia, gyms, commutes, high rise office buildings, involuntary human relationships, employment, etc.

Since the Enlightenment, 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.

We are robust when errors in the representation of the unknown and understanding of random effects do not lead to adverse outcomes —fragile otherwise. The robust benefits from Black Swan Events²⁶, the fragile is severely hit by them. We are more and more

²⁶ A Black Swan (capitalized) is an event (historical, economic, technological, personal) that is both unpredicted by some observer and carries massive consequences. In spite of growth in our knowledge, the role of these Black Swans has been growing.

fragile to a certain brand of scientific autism making confident claims about the unknown — leading to expert problems, risk, massive dependence on human error. As the reader can see from my aphorisms, I have respect for mother nature's methods of robustness (billions of years allow most of what is fragile to break); classical thought is more robust (in its respect for the unknown, the epistemic humility) than the modern post-Enlightenment naive pseudoscientific autism. Thus my classical values make me advocate the triplet of erudition, elegance, and courage; against modernity's phoniness, nerdiness and philistinism ²⁷.

Art is robust; science not always (to put mildly). Some Procrustean beds make life worth living: art, poetry, and, the most potent of all, the aphorism.

Aphorisms, maxims, proverbs, short sayings, even, to some extent, epigrams, are the earliest literary form —often integrated in what we now call poetry. They carry the cognitive compactness of the "sound bite" (though both more potent and more elegant than today's down-market version²⁸), with some show of bravado in the ability of the author to compress powerful ideas in a handful of words -- particularly in a oral format. Indeed it had to be bravado because the

²⁷ Many philistines reduce my ideas as opposing technology when in fact I am opposing the naive blindness to its side effects —the fragility criterion. I'd rather be unconditional about ethics and conditional about technology than the reverse.

²⁸ Note the distinction from TV one-liners: The sound bite loses information; the aphorism gains. Somehow, aphorisms obey the Gigerenzer and Goldstein's "less is more" effect.

Arabic word for improvised one-liner is "act of manliness", though such notion of "manliness" is less gender driven than it sounds, and can be equally translated by "the skills of being human", ("virtue" has the same roots in Latin, *vir*, man). As if those who could produce powerful thoughts in such a way were invested with talismanic powers.

The mode is at the center of the Levantine soul (and the broader Eastern Mediterranean). When God spoke to Semites, he spoke in very short poetic sentences, usually through the mouth of prophets. Consider the scriptures, more particularly the *Book of Proverbs*, *Ecclesiast*; Islam's holy book *The Koran* is a collection of concentrated aphorisms. And the format has been adopted for synthetic literary prophecies: Nietzsche's *Zarathoustra*, or, more recently, my compatriot from a neighboring (and warring) village in Northern Lebanon, Kahlil Gibran, author of *The Prophet*.

Outside of what we now call religion, take the aphorisms of Heraclitus and Hippocrates, the works of Publilius Syrus (a Syrian slave who owed his freedom to his eloquence, expressed in his *sententiae*, potent one line poems that echo in the maxims La Rochefoucauld), and the poetry of the poet who is broadly considered the greatest of all Arab poets Almutanabbi,

Aphorisms as standalone sentences have been used for exposition, for religious text, for advice to a grandchild by a Levantine grandmother, for boasting (as I said earlier, in an aphorism, Almutanabbi used them to tell us, convincingly, that he was the greatest Arab poet), for satires²⁹ (Martial, Aesop, Almaarri),

²⁹ The best way to measure the loss of intellectual sophistication in the internet age, to put it bluntly, this "nerdification", is in the growing disappearance of sarcasm as mechanistic minds take insults a bit too literally.

by the *moralistes* (Vaugenargues, La Rochefoucault, La Bruyere, Chamfort), to expose opaque philosophy (Wittgenstein), relatively clearer ones (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Cioran), or crystal clear ideas (Pascal)³⁰. You never have to explain an aphorisms --like poetry, this is something that the reader needs to deal with by himself³¹.

There are bland aphorisms, the platitudinous ones harboring important truths that you had thought about before (the kind that makes intelligent people recoil at Gibran's *The Prophet*); pleasant ones, those you never thought about but trigger in you the *Aha* of an important discovery (such as those in La Rochefoucault); but the best are those you did not think about before and for which it takes you more than one reading to realize that they are important truths, particularly when the silent character of the truth in them is so powerful that they are forgotten as soon as read.

Aphorisms require us to change our reading habits and approach them in small doses; each one of them is a complete unit, a complete narrative dissociated from others.

My best definition of a nerd: someone who asks you to explain an aphorism.

³⁰ It is not uncommon to find the same maxim repeated by several authors separated by a millennium or a continent.

³¹ The aphorism has been somewhat debased (outside the German language) by its association with witticism such as the ones by Oscar Wilde, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, or Sasha Guitry —deep thought can be poetic and witty, as with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or (sometimes) Wittgenstein; but, abiding by the separation between Sacred and Profane, philosophy and poetry are not standup comedy.

I have been aware that my style was aphoristic. As a teenager, I was mentored by the poet Georges Schéhadé (his poetry reads like proverbs) who predicted that I would see the light and grow up to make a career in poetry, once I got this ideas business out of my system. More recently, readers have triggered numerous copyright alerts (been posting quotes from my books on the web), but had never thought of re-expressing my ideas (or, rather, my central idea about the limits of knowledge) in such a way until I realized that these sentences come naturally to me, almost involuntarily, in an eerie way, particularly when walking (slowly) or when freeing up my mind to do nothing, or nothing effortful —I could convince myself that I was hearing voices from the other side of the veil of opacity.

By setting oneself totally free of constraints, free of thoughts, free of this debilitating activity called work, free of efforts, elements hidden in the texture of reality start staring at you, then mysteries that you never thought existed emerge in front of your eyes.