

Conversation with Rolf Dobelli

(2007-2009)

Dobelli [Lucerne, Switzerland] Nassim, why are you using fiction in a nonfiction book?

Taleb [Lebanon] First, Rolf, I am certain that, as a novelist, you know that fiction is a certain packaging of the truth, or higher truths. Indeed I find that there is more truth in Proust, albeit it is officially fictional, than in the babbling analyses of the *New York Times* that give us the illusions of understanding what's going on. Newspapers have officially the right facts, but their interpretations are imaginary –and their choice of facts are arbitrary. They lie with right facts; a novelist says the truth with wrong facts.

When I first read my biographical vignette by Malcolm Gladwell in the *New Yorker*, I recoiled at seeing that he put ideas in my head that were not there, and made links between my background and my ideas. These associations were unrigorous to say the least. I try to learn from the negative, by reverse-imitation. So I figured out that I, as a writer, should never produce a lie or a distortion in putting ideas in the head of real characters. The only way to do so is to produce fictional characters. The characters are mine and I can put anything I want in their thoughts.

Ideas come and go, stories stay. The thinker who has been the most read over time is Voltaire, because of the fables –something he did not expect. He thought that he would be remembered for his more serious works and for his sophisticated tragedies.

Now my book is an attack on what I call the narrative fallacy –our tendency to create explanations to give ourselves the illusion of understanding the world. But the narrative has aesthetic powers; it can be effectively used for the right purpose.

Dobelli [Aventura, Florida] True, but you actually have something to say. You have a couple of clear messages. Yes, I am a novelist, but I have nothing to say. I create a new world through fiction. So did Marcel Proust (needless to say, much better than I). So do most novelists. If you ask them what their books mean, they stare at you. And rightly so. I don't know what my books want to say. They create a world, an atmosphere, a universe. Maybe because we have nothing to say, we became novelists (the other turn would have been journalists). But, I agree with you: Stories stick. The human mind is wired for stories and has difficulties with facts and abstractions. Any

speculation about why this is so? I have often asked myself this question. Wouldn't evolution favor species that can deal with facts instead of fiction?

Taleb [New York] You have a lot to say. You just discover it by tinkering, you just let it come out.

Evolution does not favor truth, it helps you get out of trouble. Mistaking the false for true is sometimes a good thing from an evolutionary standpoint. So if something is not really true, say the tiger might not be attacking you, you will still benefit from running away. Those who mistook stones for bears survived. Those who needed "more evidence" left the gene pool in the stomach of bears.

Dobelli [Aventura, Florida] But I also benefit from facts, not just from fiction. If I do not mistake a rabbit for a bear or a tiger, I can kill it and eat it. Plus I save valuable energy by not running away. Surely, evolution favors that, too.

Taleb [Edinburgh] My point is that there are biases – some overreactions that help us overestimate some matters. But they are not general.

Back to the fiction/nonfiction divide –vastly more interesting than evolution. To me fiction is not about ideas. It is *above* ideas. I make a divide between the holy, the sacred, the mysterious, the unexplainable, the implicit, the aesthetic, the moral, and the ethical on one hand, and the empirical, the functional, the explainable, the logical, the true, and the proven on the other. In short, the Holy and the Empirical. Literature belongs to the holy. You can do fiction, nonfiction, a mixture, who cares. Literature is above the distinction. It is sacred.

I write at two levels, the aesthetic and the functional, and I aggressively mix both. Whatever frustrates the reviewers is good because they are usually philistines who have no business talking about other people's books and *critiquing* them as if they were in possession of rigorous standards. They are, I suspect, faux-experts without empirical validity. What pisses off the common reviewers seems to attract the true readers (and vice versa).

My mood swings between the aesthetic and the empirical and my text too does so. But I need to avoid a certain poisonous mixture, like trying to be empirical with the holy and holy with the empirical –like people who try to be analytical with art or economists who try to be religious with their theories.

Dobelli [Zurich, Switzerland] Let's get back to the holy and the empirical in a second. Just one comment on your reviewers first: I don't think that's the main reason why they get frustrated. They get frustrated for the same reason they get frustrated with any skeptic. Throughout the book, you hold up warning signs and "we can't know this" signs and you don't give them a solution for forecasting, avoiding or dealing with Black Swans. They are looking for the how-to chapters of the book and, when they can't find them, they get frustrated.

Taleb [Brazil] True, people like charlatans. They want the concreteness of the take-home advice, and they have no respect for negative recommendations ("don't do"). I call that the scorn of the abstract. So I compensate for the abstraction of my idea by embedding it in a narrative, in the texture of characters like Yevgenia, Nero, fat Tony, mythological fables and ancient vignettes, my personal life, and the idiosyncrasy of my delivery and choice of words. I work hard to accept no second best: I invested all my energy into my text and protected its integrity from the copy editors.

The difference between artistic prose and functional "nonfiction" writing is that the former needs to be idiosyncratic and inseparable from the author's persona while the latter has to be vanilla to be understood by someone with autism. It is the difference between a Victorian library, with its charming mess, and a modern 42nd floor corporate conference room. Take the *New York Times*: all articles seem to be written by the same person. The same applies to the ghostwritten books by hotshot executives (or successful scientists or politicians) – they all smell the 42nd floor conference room. Consider Proust again. Pick a random page, you will know it is unmistakably him – not just from the length of the sentences. He was criticized heavily by the faux-experts of his day for his idiosyncratic style, particularly by André Gide. Gibbon, Nabokov, Joseph Conrad, Faulkner, Frédéric Dard, Céline, André Malraux, Maurice Barrès, Drieu La Rochelle, Alessandro Barrico, Georges Simenon, Colette, Patrick Modiano, Albert Cohen are naturals. They do not force themselves to be themselves, nor (except for Nabokov) do they try to sound literary.

Dobelli [Zurich, Switzerland] You once said that you dislike editors. Well, I've kept up with the various stages of the *TBS* manuscript and, as far as I can see, your editors have only corrected typos. They didn't touch the meat. Now, you are very privileged. You are a best-selling author. Most other authors can't protect the integrity of their work from editors – otherwise, the book just won't get published.

Taleb [Switzerland] I was lucky to have had a bestseller with an unknown house. Larger houses bully you when you are nobody.

Dobelli [Berlin, Germany] Coming back to the fiction/nonfiction divide. I don't quite understand where you want to go with that argument. After all, you can divide the world in coconuts and noncoconuts. I understand that mixing the two, as you did in *TBS*, is completely unorthodox (and shunned by editors and critics). But I don't think that's where you want the argument to go. Could you please expand?

Taleb [New York] Let me tell you why I suggest avoiding further discussion about writing. There seems to be no activity in which people are self-referential other than writing – writers write about writing but musicians don't do music about music, painters don't paint about painting. But the separation between fiction and nonfiction is interesting *outside* writing. People in real life create a fictional world to live in it. We need fiction more than truth; except for a few applications truth is rather irrelevant. So truth is overstated.

At a different I managed to explain the irrelevance of some truths probabilistically taken in *The Black Swan*. We do not act on what is "true" (or probable) or "false" (or improbable), rather on the consequences. We put the effect ahead of the odds. This is misunderstood in logic: I often take action on the unlikely because its consequences are monstrous. If I suspect the plane might crash, I will not board it – although the probability might be very small. I may take an action that I do not think will pay off, but that has a small chance of a big hit. I may not invest in stocks although I believe that it is true that it is a good investment – because of the consequence of it turning out to be untrue.

Dobelli [Frankfurt, Germany] And these decisions – for example, to not board an airplane for fear of a crash – are heightened by that arbitrary looking glass called the "mass media." As you write in *TBS*, the more visible something is, the higher the perceived risk. But it's not only the mass media. It's also proximity that distorts perceived risks. Hey, it happens to me all the time. Let me give you an example: I always wanted to learn to paraglide from the tops of the Swiss mountains, circling for hours in the thermals, cruising from mountain top to mountain top until the sun sets and the thermals disappear. Then I saw myself gliding peacefully down to the city and landing like a feather in my backyard. I studied the accident and death stats, purchased the equipment and went for it. That same week, my friend Andy died in a paragliding accident. I stopped paragliding immediately and haven't touched my equipment ever since. Did paragliding become more dangerous because of his crash? Nope. But the perceived risk shot up dramatically.

Dobelli [Lucerne, Switzerland] Some people say your writing is arrogant. Is it you? Is it just your writing style? Is it that today's readers are not used to opinionated statements any more? If you read Michel Montaigne, that stuff is pretty intolerant. If you read almost any book today, it's pale and lacks personal aggressiveness. Yours is an exception. A marketing tactic?

I no longer understand what "arrogant" means, and if it used by those who both disagree with you and are scared by your confidence.

Dobelli [New York, U.S.] How do you handle personal attacks?

Taleb [New York] It is never pleasant for any writer to take criticism, even those of us who play philosopher. If you manage to not care, then there is something wrong with you. All writers are human. We don't play Wittgenstein's ruler and read through them in a second order way, as more revealing about the attacker than the target; we just take them at face value (like compliments always make you feel good, even when you know they are full of baloney).

Some people send me hate mail or attack my work because of genuine disagreements, but for some it is just natural envy or, in the case of quants and risk faux experts, because of cognitive dissonance. If I am right, then their job might not make any sense. The same with successful traders: if I am right, then their skills don't matter and it hurts their ego. They are therefore compelled to attack me verbally and personally, thinking it will hurt me, perhaps destroy me and make the problem go away. In the physical world, if you throw an arrow at a target you bring it down. But words are at best ineffectual and at best a signal that puts the target on a pedestal (no such thing as bad publicity). But my instinct is to think that words can actually hurt me, and that the attacks are justified. I need a trick.

So my technique is to get rid of the negative emotion, using tricks, in a way similar (see FBR) to dealing with someone blowing his car horn at a traffic light: just find a way to consider him nonhuman and you will deal with him as if you were watching a movie on anthropology, and perhaps get some entertainment. Also the trick is to avoid looking at recent attacks, just read past attacks to trivialize them: I have just put together a compilation of all the insults posted on a site before the commentators who hated me blew up (and became silent). I have to admit that I am human, and, after the fact, they appear to be funny; they will dull the edge of attacks by others.

So when facing criticism or *ad hominem* attacks I immediately play the image of an angry fellow red in the face hurling eggs at a fortress. When someone with

Nobel or some authority attacks me, I remind myself that my book will be read long after he will be dead, a reasonable hypothesis, and his *ad hominem* attacks looks funny.

Balzac wrote that while actresses paid journalists to write about them, the wily ones paid them to write *bad* things.

Another good news: if someone may potentially bother me the first time; the third or fourth time he ceases to exist. Some attackers elicit positive reaction in the recipient if they keep trying to throw the eggs at the fortress. You tend to feel a strange pleasure when they attack you as a validation of envy. One of them, a fellow called Eric Falkenstein has been for years totally obsessed with me and has posted close to 100 long articles on the web –throwing anything he can put his hands on. But you can start feeling guilt at your own success, and feel sorry for the guy as I believe that one can harm others by getting richer or more successful. You literally reduce their life expectancy –a Nobel or an Oscar have the deleterious effect of killing those who did not get them and making those who get them live longer. The same with wealth differences.

Dobelli [Arrecife, Spain] On your side point: Why fake compliments make you feel good. Actually, it depends on who is doing the complimenting. My writer friend and number two German fiction author Martin Walser (number one in sales and reputation is Nobelist Günter Grass) explained to me: "If a young woman makes me (at age80) a baloney compliment, it's flattering because she took the time and mustered her creativity exclusively for me – at which point it doesn't matter if the compliment is true or baloney." The truthfulness of a proposition becomes unimportant.

Think of all the writers who would love to get a reaction – any reaction – from their readers. They write a book and there's silence on the other side. Few enjoy the privilege of being attacked.

At what point did you know that you had found (or defined) your field? Some people never find "their field." Some folks, like Benoit Mandelbrot, find it very late in their careers. How did this come about? I don't think you woke up one morning and had your *heureka* moment. Or did you? I am interested in finding out how fields of interest that didn't exist before get created.

Taleb [London (Heathrow airport)] I had a conversation with you two years ago in which you said that Sir Doktor Professor Karl Raimund Popper wrote that there were no disciplines, just problems. So I always knew what my problem was: chance and misunderstanding of knowledge –I've had it for as long as I can remember. But I am still looking for a discipline.

Dobelli [Lucerne, Switzerland] And Margaret Thatcher said: "There is no society, just people."

I just finished reading *A History of God* by Karen Armstrong. The book is brilliant – so brilliant that I started reading it for a second time. You had recommended the book to me. On your blog that you don't call a blog are several entries on religion. How is religion connected to your "discipline" of chance and cognitive errors (unless, of course, you interpret Blaise Pascal's wager in a statistical sense)?

Taleb [San Francisco] This is what I wrote in my notebook (#29 Trust and Belief)

You watch a James Bond movie, with your hero chased by villains. You know that it is not a real life situation, that the person is just an actor –that the blood is some brand of tomato juice and that the criminal is a nice guy in real life. But you ignore this background information for the purpose of the movie. You have decided to trust, to suspend your inquisition and trust what the creator of the movie had in mind.

Likewise, you do not exercise your first-order interpretation skills when looking at art. To "understand" religion you also have to "understand" art –something idiot savants have trouble with because they fall for the literal.

I was told by a family member who is studying Koiné Greek that in the Septuagint πιστεύω meant initially "to trust". It drifted later to mean "to believe". Septuagint 4.5 for instance, να πιστεωσωσιν σοι τι Πτα σοι κριος θες τιν Πατέρων α τιν θες Αβρααμ κα θες Ισαακ κα θες Ιακωβ, πιστεω (like the Arabic "amin" –amen comes from it). When modern Semites recite "Amin bi ...", Amin – Mu'min, Ma'mun, Musta'min, are declensions around trust. Actually Amn safety has the exact same root. Amen means, literally, "I trust".

Armstrong got the point. I saw it in her book. Religion might have started as a Fooled by Randomness problem (of seeing false patterns to chart uncertainty). But soon, later it developed into 1) theosis (Orthodoxy, Buddhism, and mystical Sufi Islam), 2) golden rules ("don't do to others..."). Furthermore she is not an academic, which means that her interest is genuine (academics are fake).

I see a third attribute of religion: to satisfy your illusion of control and take you away from the doctor (#60 – Medicine protects you from bad science). Medicine killed so many people that anything that takes you away from it was good for you.

Dobelli [Geneva, Switzerland] And that is exactly the genius of the early Greek playwrights. The spectators of a Sophocles play were urged to weep at the sight of tragedy. As a matter of fact, that was the whole point: to instill a sense of compassion. The playwrights put suffering on stage. Think of Oedipus, a guy who killed his father and married his mother. Sophocles wanted you to extend your sympathies to this (screwed-up) guy. And it worked, despite the fact that everybody knew it was all show. Eventually, Greece abandoned the compassion culture and became something of a proto-Prussian militaristic society (run by first-order thinking bureaucrats) and, with that, the playwright culture died.

So, in a sense, art (and religion) requires a cognitive error. Without that error, we couldn't appreciate it.

One thing that's missing in Armstrong's discussion on religion is the probabilistic perspective: most strikingly, the survivorship bias. We are looking back at our monotheistic God, including all of its modifications. We trace it back to the first and faintest notions of Yahweh (Yahweh Sabaoth, to be precise – a simple war god). Yet, I can't but think of the many other trajectories of other gods or god concepts that didn't make it. Either because these notions were not adaptable to the times or because the respective worshippers died out, or they were forced to convert, or maybe the written evidence didn't survive. Whatever the reason, in light of the survivorship bias, the notions of our Christian / Jewish / Muslim Gods seem pretty arbitrary. It's like a stock that jumped by pure chance while the others went bankrupt. But nobody could tell in advance which stock would jump. Same with the concept of Yahweh. I'd like to get your thoughts on that.

Taleb [New York] If you read the works of the anthropologists Scott Atran, Dan Sperber, and Pascal Boyer, you would notice that there are "basins". Different populations seem to independently discover the same gods. So I do not think that it is arbitrary. Armstrong herself discusses convergence in the other masterpiece: *The Great Transformation*.

Dobelli [New York] After having read Armstrong again, one question popped in my mind: Why is it that there are so few religions? Just imagine how many other thousands and thousands of religions are thinkable. I am not astonished by the number of species, for example. There are not all the species that you could think of – some simply have not evolved. So I wouldn't expect to see all conceivable types of species on this planet. But I am damn astonished that there are not more religions out there (considering the fact that we don't need biological mechanics for mutation and propagation, thinking it up and spreading the word is all it would need). What is it that's at play here?

Taleb [Mumbai] We have concentration in anything cultural, to start with. Consider languages: they follow

some sort of concentrated distribution that resembles fractal power laws. The problem is that religions are mutually inclusive and intolerant of each others so we do not have the equivalent of bilingual people or dual citizens. So they concentrate more.

(PS- Since then I met Armstrong, sat at a lunch next to her, and showed her your enthusiastic email as I had it on on my laptop. But I did not have a good rapport with her. She does not seem very social. She is a reclusive scholar.)

Dobelli [Lucerne, Switzerland] You prefer nonacademic thinkers to academic ones. Why? I see brilliant people on both sides. Shouldn't you draw the line between financially dependent and independent thinkers (academic or not)?

Taleb [London (Heathrow airport)] I've mingled with academics –some are brilliant; alas most are half-men incapable of facing truth and reality. So they get together and create a world in which they can succeed.

I like self-owned people. Academics are rarely self-owned.

Dobelli [Zurich, Switzerland] Fiction writers often have a difficult time getting out of their characters. How is your own life affected by your ideas? How do you go through the day without constantly observing yourself and your (inevitable) biases, heuristics and cognitive errors?

Taleb [Brussels] I will be blunt: I am monstrously human in real life. I love to make mistakes. But I like small mistakes.

Dobelli [Lucerne, Switzerland] Can you increase happiness by knowing your cognitive errors (and by avoiding them)?

(A side note: I believe that happiness is not equal to the absence of disaster – or vice versa. It's not a linear opposite. The two properties (happiness and unhappiness) are somehow correlated, but in a strange way. But that's for the happiness researchers to figure out, for the Dan Gilbert types.)

Taleb [New York] Let me repeat my statement about small mistakes. You will not increase happiness by increasing cognitive fitness and rationality. Happiness requires some wisdom about big things, but childishness with the small things. This is my domain separation. I like to make cognitive errors where they are part of the texture of life. It is part of being human; *homo sum*.

Thank you for the conversation. Let me now go on to make small, not large, mistakes. Ciao.

