

Disorderly conduct

Philosopher advocates ... well, we're not entirely sure

Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder, by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (Random House, 519 pages, \$33)

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Review by: Jeff Heinrich
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I am not worthy. Yes, I know, dear editor, you asked me to review this brick called Antifragile, and you laughed when I mistook the "New York Times bestselling author of The Black Swan" on the jacket cover for a reference to that oh-so-dark ballet movie Natalie Portman got an Oscar for.

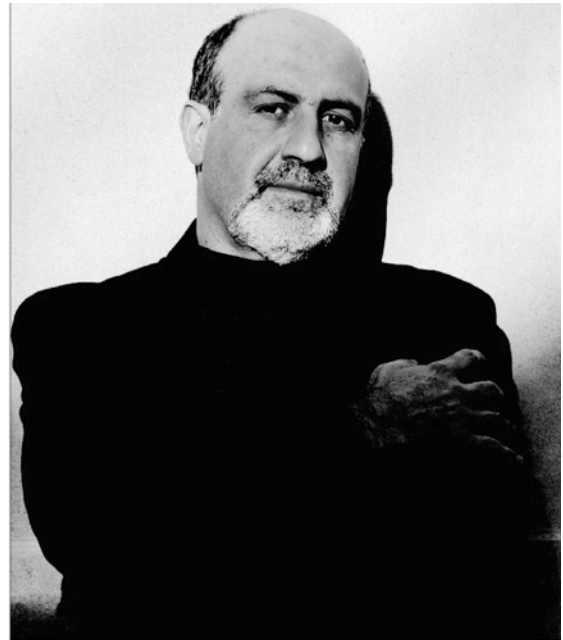
You laughed, and asked me to review it anyway. "You can have fun with it," you said, giving me 800-odd words to distill 519 pages. Well, I've tried, and after wading through them all, bookmarking the ones with the most interesting or quotable passages, my head is spinning.

At best, I'm left feeling that (to borrow from the book's subtitle) I am a sentient thing that gains from the disorder of author Nassim Nicholas Taleb's rambling prose. At worst, I'm just one of those no-good literary tourists he hates, too much of a dilettante to appreciate his high-concept ideas.

"Negative convexity bias," "predictionizing," "the medical fragilista" - huh? Maybe you'd be stumped, too.

Luckily, Taleb's book is full of personal anecdotes about his life, so it's possible to get a fix on the man himself. (I also read an interview or two he gave online, and some reviews of his book – I know, so lazy.)

Taleb is a philosopher, a Lebanese-born American who used to be a stock market trader, a derivatives specialist. He went into academia in 2006 (NYU, Oxford), became an essayist and author and "predicted" the global financial meltdown of 2008.



He also comes across as a helluva personality: irascible, finicky, vain, prone to fits of pique at those who mischaracterize his ideas (uh-oh, better watch out), disdainful of journalists (double uh-oh), a weightlifter, too (this is your third and final warning).

On the other hand, he has habits I admire: He told the New Scientist he only goes to doctors if he's really sick, he takes a dose of local water (a drop, no more) when visiting India (good for the immune system) and apparently he's never been in debt.

He's a purist about the fruits he eats (they have to stem back to the ancient Greeks and Hebrews; so, grapes and figs, but no oranges), and only drinks things that have stood the test of time - at least a millennium: "Just wine, water and coffee. No soft drinks."

So what? We all have our preferences. That's all so much trivia. No one reads Taleb – an author whose "books have been published in thirty-three languages," the jacket boasts – to learn his culinary habits. No, his real claim to fame is as a thinker – and there's plenty of that in Antifragile.

Taleb is a guru of randomness and serendipity, a free spirit who believes we'd all benefit from embracing the sheer unpredictability of life – by embracing risk, essentially. That's what he means by "anti-fragile," the opposite of fragile: the quality of not only resisting the shock of change, but of getting better because of it.

Too much of modern life, he argues, is over-managed by "rationalists" (doctors, bankers, social planners, policy-makers, soldiers) who by regulating our existence actually make us more prone to being engulfed by crisis, not being able to rise above it. Indeed, humans need the "titillation" of randomness – a succession of small shocks – to make their lives pleasurable.

"I myself, while writing these lines, try to avoid the tyranny of a precise and explicit plan, drawing from an opaque source inside me that gives me surprises," he says early on in Antifragile. "Writing is only worth it when it provides us with the tingling effect of adventure, which is why I ... dislike the straitjacket of the 750-word op-ed, which ... bores me to tears."

Ouch. I'm only at 600 words now and already sense Taleb the Great Philosopher staring down at me with those bored, disdainful eyes. I am not worthy. Hide this review from him.

But let me first say that anyone who can also write this brief sentence – "The next paragraph is a bit technical and can be skipped" – is my kind of intellectual. Sure,

Taleb is verbose, but he knows when to put a sock in it. For a futurist (not a label he likes, but it fits to a certain extent), he's also delightfully retrograde, admitting in the same chapter to "writing these lines longhand, using a seasoned fountain pen."

He can be helpful, too, offering a seven-page glossary of his neologisms. "Fragilista" is there: "Someone who causes fragility because he thinks he understands what's going on. Also usually lacks sense of humour." So is "Touristification: The attempt to suck randomness out of life. Applies to soccer moms, Washington civil servants, strategic planners, social engineers, 'nudge' manipulators, etc. Opposite: rational flâneur."

I only glanced at the book's 44 pages of appendices and notes, the 23-page bibliography and the 12-page index, and I want to be honest about that.

Most of all, I must defiantly state that I don't have a clue what Antifragile is really all about. I don't. And so I guess that makes me an "antifragilista" - worthy of something, perhaps, after all.

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