

PLEASE ADD on a separate page after the introduction.

NOTICE

Aphorisms are different from conventional text. The author recommends reading no more than four aphorisms in one sitting. It is also preferable to select these randomly.

Additional Aphorisms, Rules, and Heuristics (Added to the Incerto)

NASSIM NICHOLAS TALEB

I Preludes

II Counter Narratives

III Matters Ontological

IV The Sacred and the Profane

V Chance, Success, Happiness, and Stoicism

VI Charming and Less Charming Sucker Problems

VII Theseus, or Living the Natural Life

VIII The Republic of Letters

IX The Universal and the Particular

X Fooled by Randomness

XI Aesthetics

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XIII Robustness & (Anti) Fragility

XIV The Ludic Fallacy and Domain Dependence

XV Epistemology and Subtractive Knowledge

XVI The Scandal of Prediction

XVII Being a Philosopher and Managing to Remain One

XVIII Economic Life and Other Very Vulgar Subjects

XIX The Sage, the Weak, and the Magnificent

XX The Implicit and the Explicit

XXI On the Varieties of Love and Nonlove

XXII The End

[Ignore numbering. The Roman number indicates the section where the aphorism is to be added.]

I2. Erudition without bullshit, intellect without cowardice, courage without imprudence, mathematics without nerdiness, scholarship without academia, intelligence without shrewdness, religiosity without intolerance, elegance without softness, sociality without dependence, enjoyment without addiction, religion without tolerance, and, above all, nothing without skin in the game.

I 1. People are much less interested in what you are trying to show them than in what you are trying to hide.

II 3. A government stating, “We will not stand idle in front of atrocities committed by [foreign dictator XYZ]” is typically trying to mitigate the guilt for standing idle in front of more atrocities committed by said XYZ.

II 4. Almost all those caught making a logical fallacy interpret it as a “disagreement.”

II 5. France took Algeria hoping for a country to eat cassoulet, and instead France is now eating couscous.

II 6. If powerful assholes don't find you "arrogant," it means you are doing something wrong.

II 7. If someone is making an effort to ignore you, he is not ignoring you.

II 8. In your prayers substitute "Protect us from evil" with "Protect us from those who improve things for a salary."

II 9. Most mistakes get worse when you try to correct them.

II 10. Much of the difference between what is work and what is leisure is branding.

II 11. Never read a book review written by an author whose books you wouldn't read.

II 12. One of life's machinations is to make some people both rich and unhappy, that is, jointly fragile and deprived of hope.

II 13. People don't like it when you ask them for help; they also feel left out when you don't ask them for help.

II 14. Sometimes people ask you a question with their eyes begging you to not tell them the truth.

II 15. The dream of having computers behave like humans is coming true, with the transformation, in a single generation, of humans into computers.

II 16. The first one who uses "but" has lost the argument.

II 17. The main reason to go to school is to learn how *not* to think like a professor.

II 18. The modern hypocrite gives the designation "respect" to what is nothing but fear of the powerful.

II 19a.[INSERTED] If you want strangers to help you, smile. For those close to you, cry.

II 19. We tend to define rudeness less by the words used (what is said) than by the status of the recipient (to whom it is addressed).

II 20. When someone writes “I dislike you but I agree with you,” I read “I dislike you because I agree with you.”

II 21. It is a very powerful manipulation to let others win the small battles.

II 22. People feel deep anxiety finding out that someone they thought was stupid is actually more intelligent than they are.

III 23. Automation makes otherwise pleasant activities turn into “work.”

III 24. For life to be really fun, what you fear should line up with what you desire.

III 25. If you get easily bored, it means that your BS detector is functioning properly; if you forget (some) things, it means that your mind knows how to filter; and if you feel sadness, it means that you are human.

III 26. It is not possible to have fun when you try.

III 27. Life is about execution rather than purpose.

III 28. The good life—the *vita beata*—is like reading a Russian novel: It takes two hundred pages of struggling with the characters before one can start enjoying things. Then the agitation starts to make sense.

III 29. The ultimate freedom lies in not having to explain why you did something.

III 30. Thinking that all individuals pursue “selfish” interests is equivalent to assuming that all random variables have zero covariance.

III 31. We need to feel a little bit lost somewhere, physically or intellectually, at least once a day.

IV 32. Atheists are just modern versions of religious fundamentalists: both take religion too literally.

IV 33. Religion isn't so much about telling man that there is one God as about preventing man from thinking that he is God.

IV 34. Paganism is decentralized theology.

IV 35. The ancient Mediterranean: before monotheism, people changed and exchanged rites and gods as we do ethnic foods.

IV 36a. The fewer the Gods the greater the dogma and theological intolerance. So $n=0$ ("modern" atheists), $n=1$ (Sunni purists), $n=1-2$ (Monophysites), $n=3-12$ (Greek Orthodoxy), n flex (Ancient Mediterranean Paganism).

IX 36. For an honest man, freedom requires having no friends; and, one step above, sainthood requires having no family.

V 37. Never hire an A student unless it is to take exams.

V 38. Business wars are typically lost by both parties; academic wars are won by both sides.

V 39. Corollary: if you socialize with someone with a smaller bank account than yours, you are obligated to converse as if you had exactly the same means, eat in the places where he eats, at no point in time show the pictures of your vacation in Provence or anything that hints at the differential in means.

V 40. Did you notice that collecting art is to hobby-painting as watching pornography is to doing the real thing? Only difference is status.

V 41. Do not socialize with people much richer than you; but if you do, do it in your own territory (restaurants you can afford, wine, etc.)

V 42. I wonder how many people would seek excessive wealth if it did not carry a measure of status with it.

V 43. In the days of Suetonius, 60 percent of prominent educators (grammarians) were slaves. Today the ratio is 97.1 percent, and growing.

V 44. It is good to not feel envy; but better to neither envy nor be envied.

V 45. Success in all endeavors requires the absence of specific qualities. 1) To succeed in crime requires absence of empathy, 2) To succeed in banking you need absence of shame at hiding risks, 3) To succeed in school requires absence of common sense, 4) To succeed in economics requires absence of understanding of probability, risk, second-order effects, or about anything, 5) To succeed in journalism requires an inability to think about matters that have even an infinitesimally small chance of being relevant next January, 6) But to succeed in life requires a total inability to do anything that makes you uncomfortable when you look at yourself in the mirror.

V 46. The alpha person at a gathering of “high status” persons is often, detectably, the waiter.

V 47. The natural benefit of cellphones, laptops, and other indispensable modern items is the joy one gets finding the object after losing it. Lose your wallet full of credit cards and you will have a chance to have a great day.

V 48. There is no clearer sign of failure than a middle-aged man boasting of his performance in college.

V 49. What we commonly call “success” (rewards, status, recognition, some new metric) is a consolation prize for those who are both unhappy and not good at what they do.

V 50. You can tell how poor someone feels by the number of times he references “money” in his conversation.

V 51. You will never know for sure if someone is an asshole until he becomes rich.

V 52. Studying the work and intellectual habits of a “genius” to learn from him is like studying the garb of a chef to emulate his cooking.

V 53. To figure out how well you will do ten years from now relative to someone else, count your enemies, count his, and square the ratio.

VI 54. All rumors about a public figure are to be deemed untrue until he threatens to sue.

VI 55. Bureaucracy is a construction designed to maximize the distance between a decision-maker and the risks of the decision.

VI 56. Executive programs allow us to watch people who have never worked lecturing those who have never pondered.

VI 57. Never get into a business partnership with a retired lawyer unless he has another hobby.

VI 58. Never show a risk number, even if it is right.

VI 59. People tend to whisper when they say the truth and raise their voice when they lie.

VI 60. The problem with academics is that they really think nonacademics find them more intelligent than themselves.

VI 61. The rational heuristic is to avoid any market commentary from anyone who has to work for a living. [DUPL?]

VI 62. Under opacity, incomplete information, and partial understanding, much of what we don't understand is labeled “irrational.”

VI 63. Universities have been progressing from providing scholarship for a small fee into selling degrees at a large cost.

VI 64. When people say, “I am investing for the long term,” it means they are losing money.

VI 65. The fact that people in countries with cold weather tend to be harder working, richer, less relaxed, less amicable, less tolerant of idleness, more (over)organized and more harried than those in hotter climates should make us wonder whether wealth is mere indemnification, and motivation is just overcompensation for not having a real life.

VII 66. A good book gets better on the second reading. A great book on the third. Any book not worth rereading isn't worth reading.

VII 67. A heuristic on whether you have control of your life: can you take naps?

VII 68. Fasting: every human should learn to read, write, respect the weak, take risks in voicing disrespect for the powerful when warranted, and fast.

VII 69b. In summary, modernity replaced process by result and the relational by the transactional.

VII 69. High Modernity: routine in place of physical effort, physical effort in place of mental expenditure, and mental expenditure in place of mental clarity.

VII 70. In real life exams, someone gives you an answer and you have to find the best corresponding questions.

VII 71. It used to take seven years to figure out if a book is a book or journalism between covers. Now all one needs is wait two years. Soon, a few months.

VII 72. Life is about early detection of the reversal point beyond which your own belongings (say, a house, country house, car, or business) start owning you.

VII 73. One of the shortest books I've ever read had 745 pages.

VII 74. Real life (*vita beata*) is when your choices correspond to your duties.

VII 75. Some ideas are born as you write then down, others become dead.

VII 76. The longest book I've ever read was 205 pages. [MOVE TO AFTER VII 73]

VII 77. Formal education is credentials plus negative knowledge, so it sort of works out on balance.

VII 78. I fail to see the difference between extreme wealth and overdose.

VII 79. It is a curse to have ideas that people understand only when it is too late.

VII 80. The most important aspect of fasting is that you feel deep, undirected gratitude when you break the fast.

VIII 81. A risk you run when you write a book calling journalists BS vendors is that all your reviewers will be BS vendors.

VIII 82. A writer told me, "I didn't get anything done today." Answer: try to do nothing. The best way to have only good days is to not aim at getting anything done. Actually almost everything I've written that has survived was written when I didn't try to get anything done.

VIII 83. Authors deplete their soul when the marginal contribution of a new book is smaller than that of the previous one.

VIII 84. I want to write books that only those who read them claim they did.

VIII 85. I was told to write medium-sized books. Yet of the two most successful French novels in history, one is very short (*Le Petit Prince*, 80 pages), other extra long (Proust's *Recherche*, 3,200 pages), following the statistical arcsine law.

VIII 86. I wonder why newssuckers don't realize that if news had the slightest predictive and nonanecdotal value journalists would be monstrously rich. And if journalists were really not interested in money they would be writing literary essays.

VIII 87. If the professor is not capable of giving a class without preparation, don't attend. People should only teach what they have learned organically, through experience and curiosity . . . or get another job.

VIII 88. If you don't feel that you haven't read enough, you haven't read enough.

VIII Mathematicians think in symbols, physicists in objects, philosophers in concepts, geometers in images, jurists in constructs, logicians in operators, writers in impressions, and idiots in words.

VIII 89. Remove all empty words from writings, résumés, conversation, except when they aim at courtesy.

X 90. God created Monte Carlo and similar places so extremely rich people would come experience extreme envy.

X 91. A hotshot is someone temporarily perceived to be of some importance, rather than perceived to be of some temporary importance.

X 92. An academic cannot lose his tenure, but a businessman and risk taker, poor or rich, can go bankrupt. That is the infuriating inequality.

X 93. If a pilot crashes a plane, $n=1$ is not anecdote; if he doesn't crash the plane, $n=100$ is anecdote.

X 94. It is very difficult to argue with salaried people that the simple can be important and the important can be simple.

X 95. Journalists cannot grasp that what is interesting is not necessarily important; most cannot even grasp that what is sensational is not necessarily interesting.

X 96. Never rid anyone of an illusion unless you can replace it in his mind with another illusion.

X 97. Polemic is a lucrative form of entertainment, as the media can employ unpaid and fiercely motivated actors.

X 98. Probability is the intersection of the most rigorous mathematics and the messiest of life.

X 99. To rephrase, every human should at all times have equality in probability (which we can control), not equality in outcome.

X 100. Just as statisticians understand the risks of roulette sequences better than carpenters, probabilists understand systemic ecological risks better than biologists.

XI 101. A golden saddle on a sick horse makes the problem feel worse; pomp and slickness in form make absence of substance nauseating.

XI 102. Studying neurobiology to understand humans is like studying ink to understand literature.

XI 103. Silence is only informational if you can speak skillfully.

XII 104. If we are the only animal with a sense of justice, it would clearly be because we also are about the only animal with a sense of cruelty.

XII 105. A prostitute who sells her body (temporarily) is vastly more honorable than someone who sells his opinion for promotion or job tenure.

XII 106. Accept the rationality of time, never its fairness and morality.

XII 107. Another marker for charlatans: they don't voice opinions that can get them in trouble.

XII 108. Any action one takes with the aim of winning an award, any award,.

XII 109. Anything people do, write, or say to enhance their status beyond what they give others shows like a mark on their foreheads, visible to others but not to them.

XII 110. Envy, like thirst for revenge, is the wicked person's version of our natural sense of injustice.

XII 111. Every angel is an asshole somewhere.

XII 112. Every asshole is an angel somewhere.

XII 113. For social mobility to work, it needs to be a two-way highway, with a large number of pre-rich and an almost as large one of post-rich.

XII 114. I am rather fed up with those who tell me to be nice and try to convince charlatans. The FBI didn't "try to convince" the Mafia to abandon its activities.

XII 115. It is a great compliment for an honest person to be mistaken for a crook by a crook.

XII 116. It is easy for others, but not for you, to detect the asymmetry between what you gain and what you give by doing, writing, or saying.

XII 117. It is quite a predicament to be both evil and risk-averse.

XII 118. It takes a lot of skills to be virtuous without being boring.

XII 119. Multiplicative generosity: limit your generosity to those who, in turn, given the circumstances, would be equally generous towards others.

XII 120. Never buy a product that the owner of the company that makes it doesn't use, or, in the case of, say, medication, wouldn't contingently use.

XII 121. Never call someone an imbecile (or a fucking idiot) unless he causes harm to others/system; there must be a moral dimension to insults.

XII 122. Never take an advice from a salesman, or any advice that benefits the advice giver.

XII 123. People reveal much more about themselves while lying than when they tell the truth.

XII 124. Something shoddy: citizenship of convenience, holding the passport of a country for ease of travel/tax without committing to its community.

XII 125. Supposedly, if you are uncompromising or intolerant with BS you lose friends. But you will also make friends, better friends.

XII 126. The bottom half has typically been screwed by the middle class. That's the entire story of Rome.

XII 127. Trust those who are greedy for money a thousand times more than those who are greedy for credentials.

XII 128. Trust those who trust you and distrust those who are suspicious of others.

XII 129. Virtue is when the income you wish to show the tax agency exceeds what you wish to show your neighbor.

XII 130. Distributive justice isn't taking from a risk taker who earned honorably, it is keeping his probability of losing it very high.

XII 131. Soldiers are more loyal to their comrades (and willing to die for them) than to their country. Academics are more loyal to their peers than to truth.

XII 132. The difference between the politician and the philosopher is that, in a debate, the politician doesn't try to convince the other side, only the audience.

XII 133. Your duty is to scream those truths that one should shout but that are merely whispered.

XIII 134. Failure-resistant is achievable; failure-free is not.

XIII 135a The trick in life (and risk management) is to have as much respect for experience before one acquires said experience, as one would after.

XIII 135. General principle: the solutions (on balance) need to be simpler than the problems.

XIII 136. Increasingly, people don't become academics because of intelligence, but rather because of a lower grasp of disorder.

XIII 137. The only valid political system is one that can handle an imbecile in power without suffering from it.

XIII 138. The problem with the idea of "learning from one's mistakes" is that most of what people call mistakes aren't mistakes.

XIII 139. To understand how something works, figure out how to break it.

XIII 140. You can expect blowups and explosive errors in fields where there is a penalty for simplicity.

XIII142. For a free person, the optimal—most opportunistic—route between two points should never be the shortest one.

XIV 143. I recently had a meal in a fancy restaurant with complicated dishes with fancy names (\$125 per person), then enjoyed a pizza afterward, straight out of the oven, \$7.95. I wonder why the pizza isn't twenty times the price of the complicated dish, since I'd rather have the former—at any price—over the latter.

XIV 144. Just as eating cow meat doesn't turn you into a cow, studying philosophy doesn't make you wiser.

XIV 145. Mistakes detected by copy editors are not likely to be noticed by readers, and vice versa.

XIV 146. Most can't figure out why one can like rigorous knowledge and despise academics, yet they understand that one can like food and hate canned tuna.

XIV 147. People like to eat fish by the water even if the fish was caught far away and transported by trucks.

XIV 148. Those who can't do shouldn't teach.

XIX 149. You are free in inverse proportion to the number of people to whom you can't say "fuck you." But you are honorable in proportion to the number of people to whom you can say "fuck you" with impunity but don't.

XIX 150. Contra the prevailing belief, "success" isn't being on top of a hierarchy, it is standing outside all hierarchies.

XIX 151. I never trust a man who doesn't have enemies.

XIX 152. If you are only bad-mouthed by people who prefer your company over those of many others, only critiqued by those who scrutinize your work, and only insulted by persons who open your email as soon as they see it, then you are doing the right thing.

XIX 153. It is a sign of weakness to avoid showing signs of weakness.

XIX 154. It takes some humanity to feel sympathy for those less fortunate than us; but it takes honor to avoid envying those who are much luckier.

XIX 155. Risk takers never complain. They do.

XIX 156. Someone said, “We need more women in academic philosophy.” But we also need more men in academic philosophy.

XIX 157. The first, and hardest, step to wisdom: avert the standard assumption that people know what they want.

XIX 158. To be a person of virtue you need to be boringly virtuous in every single small action. To be a person of honor all you need is to be honorable in a few important things (risk your life or career or reputation for a just cause, say, or live up to your word when nobody else has the guts to do so).

XIX 159. Virtue is sequence of small acts of omission. Honor and grandeur can be a single gutsy, momentous, and self-sacrificial act of commission.

XIX 160. When I die, I want the highest number of firemen, risk takers, and other real people and the smallest number of academics to attend my funeral

XIX 161. When you cite some old wisdom-style quote and add “important truth,” “to remember,” or “something to live by,” you are not doing so because it is good, only because it is inapplicable. Had it been both good and applicable you would not have had to cite it. Wisdom that is hard to execute isn’t really wisdom.

XIX162. Be polite, courteous, and gentle, but ignore comments, praise, and criticism from people you wouldn’t hire.

XIX 163. It is very easy to be stoic, in failure.

XIX 164. Magnificence is defined by the intersection of reluctant praise by your enemies and criticism by your friends; greatness by their union.

XIX 165. We viciously accept narcissism in nation-states, while repressing it in individuals: complexity exposes the system’s shaky moral foundations.

XV 166. Change your anchor to what did not happen rather than what did happen.

XV 167. In a conflict, the middle ground is least likely to be correct.

XV 168. In the medical and social domains, treatment should never be equivalent to silencing symptoms.

XV 169. Those who violate a rule in a logically self-consistent system can only do well if they violate at least one additional logical rule.

XVII 170. It is perplexing but amusing to observe people getting extremely excited about things you don't care about; it is sinister to watch them ignore things you believe are fundamental.

XVII 171. A philosopher uses logic without statistics, an economist uses statistics without logic, a physicist uses both.

XVII 172. For many people, it takes a lot of preparation to learn to become ordinary.

XVII 173. If your approach to mathematics is mechanical not mystical, you're not going to go anywhere.

XVII 174. Let us find what risks we can measure and these are the risks we should be taking.

XVII 175. Mathematics demands an uncontrolled hunger for abstraction, philosophy a very controlled one.

XVII 176. Salaried people are just stepparents. They can be good stepparents but never match the biological.

XVIII 177. An economist is a mixture of 1) a businessman without common sense, 2) a physicist without brains, and 3) a speculator without balls.

XVIII 178. Anyone who likes meetings should be banned from attending meetings.

XVIII 179. Being an entrepreneur is an existential not just a financial thing.

XVIII 180. Bring the good news in trickles, the bad news in lumps.

XVIII 181. Financial inequalities are ephemeral, one crash away from reallocation; inequalities of status and the academic-bureaucratic “elite” are there to stay.

XVIII 182. If something (say, a stock price) looks slightly out of line, it is out of line. If it looks way out of line, you are wrong in your method of evaluation.

XVIII 183. Money corrupts those who talk (and write) about it more than those who earn it.

XVIII 184. Never ask your client for advice.

XVIII 185. Never take investment advice from someone who has to work for a living.

XVIII 186. Saying someone is good at making profits but not good at managing risk is like saying someone is a great surgeon except for cases when the patients die.

XVIII 187. There are three types of large corporations: those about to go bankrupt, those that are bankrupt and hide it, those that are bankrupt and don't know it.

XVIII 188. A trader listened to the firm's “chief” economist's predictions about gold, then lost a bundle. The trader was asked to leave the firm. He then angrily asked the boss who was firing him, “Why do you fire me alone, not the economist? He too is responsible for the loss.” The boss: “You idiot, we are not firing you for losing money—we are firing you for listening to the economist.”

XVIII 189. Economics is about making simple things more complicated, mathematics about making complicated things simpler.

XVIII 190. If you detect a repressed smile on the salesperson's face, you paid too much for it.

XVIII 191. It is easier to macrobullshit than to microbullshit.

XVIII 192. Stiglitz understands everything about economics except for tail risks, which is like knowing everything about flight safety except for crashes.

XVIII 193. Those with brains and no balls become mathematicians, those with balls and no brains join the Mafia, those with no balls and no brains become economists.

XVIII 194. To have a great day: 1) Smile at a stranger, 2) surprise someone by saying something unexpectedly nice, 3) give some genuine attention to an elderly person, 4) invite someone who doesn't have many friends for coffee, 5) humiliate an economist, publicly, or create deep anxiety inside a Harvard professor.

XVIII 195. When positive, show net; when negative, show gross.

XX 196. A happier world is one in which everyone realizes that 1) it is not what you tell people, it is how you say it that makes them feel bad; 2) it is not what you do to them but how you make them look that gets them angry; 3) they should be the ones putting themselves in a specific category.

XX 197. Complaints don't deliver complaints, they mostly reveal your weakness.

XX 198.a Knowing stuff others don't know is most effective when others don't know you know stuff they don't know.

XX 198. If something looks irrational—and has been so for a long time—odds are you have a wrong definition of rationality.

XX 199. If your beard is gray, produce heuristics and advice but explain the “why.” If your beard is white, skip the why, just say what should be done.

XX 200. People laugh out loud and broadcast their laughter when they're worried about the statement that they purportedly find funny. They would smile—perhaps surreptitiously—otherwise.

XX 201. Swearing on occasion, amid a rich vocabulary, is costly signaling that you are self-owned.

XX 202. The general principle of antifragility: it is much better to do things you cannot explain than explain things you cannot do.

XX 203. The rules you explain are less convincing than the ones you don't explain—or have to explain.

XX 204. You can only insult a barbarian in his own language.

XX205. The only people who think that real world experience doesn't matter are those who never had real world experience.

XXI 206. An enemy who becomes a friend will stay a friend; a friend turned enemy will never become one.

XXI 207. Humans need to complain just as they need to breathe. Never stop them; just manipulate them by controlling what they complain about and supply them with reasons to complain. They will complain but be thankful.

XXI 208. Injuries done to us by others tend to be acute; the self-inflicted ones tend to be chronic.

XXI 209. Journalists feel contempt for those who fear them and a deep resentment for those who don't.

XXI 210. The ones who refer to you repeatedly as “my friend” are most likely to betray you.

XXI 211. Used skillfully, a compliment will be much more offensive than any disparagement.

XXI 212. What counts is not what people say about you, it is how much energy they spend in saying it.

XXI 213. When people call you intelligent it is almost always because they agree with you. Otherwise they just call you arrogant.

XXI214. We often benefit from harm done to us by others, almost never from self-inflicted injuries.

XXII 215. The only problem with the last laugh is that the winner has to laugh alone.

XXII 216. Wisdom isn't about understanding things (and people); it is knowing what they can do to you.

XXI 217. You may eventually forgive and befriend someone who harmed you, never someone who bored you.