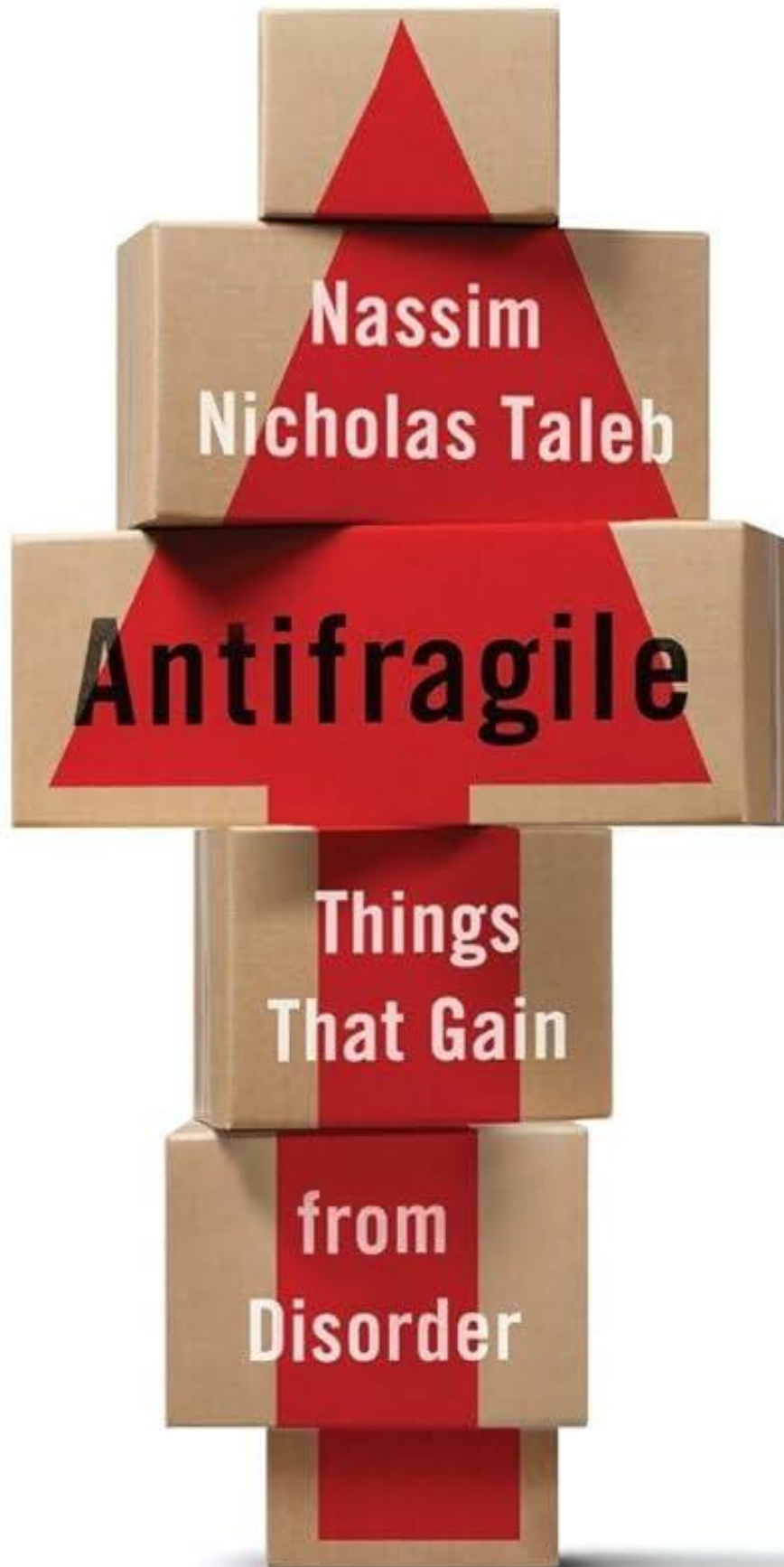


*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
**THE BLACK SWAN**



# ANTIFRAGILE

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THINGS THAT GAIN FROM DISORDER

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**NASSIM  
NICHOLAS TALEB**



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*To Sarah Josephine Taleb*

# Contents

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[\*Cover\*](#)

[\*Title Page\*](#)

[\*Copyright\*](#)

[\*Dedication\*](#)

[\*\*\*Chapter Summaries and Map\*\*\*](#)

[Prologue](#)

[APPENDIX: The Triad, or A Map of the World and Things Along the Three Properties](#)

## **BOOK I: THE ANTIFRAGILE: AN INTRODUCTION**

### **Chapter 1. Between Damocles and Hydra**

[\*Half of Life Has No Name\*](#)

[\*Please Behead Me\*](#)

[\*On the Necessity of Naming\*](#)

[\*Proto-Antifragility\*](#)

[\*Domain Independence Is Domain Dependent\*](#)

### **Chapter 2. Overcompensation and Overreaction Everywhere**

[\*How to Win a Horse Race\*](#)

[\*Antifragile Responses as Redundancy\*](#)

[\*On the Antifragility of Riots, Love, and Other Unexpected Beneficiaries of Stress\*](#)

[\*Please Ban My Book: The Antifragility of Information\*](#)

[\*Get Another Job\*](#)

### **Chapter 3. The Cat and the Washing Machine**

[\*The Complex\*](#)

[\*Stressors Are Information\*](#)

[\*Equilibrium, Not Again\*](#)

[\*Crimes Against Children\*](#)

[\*Punished by Translation\*](#)

[\*Touristification\*](#)

[\*The Secret Thirst for Chance\*](#)

### **Chapter 4. What Kills Me Makes Others Stronger**

[Antifragility by Layers](#)  
[Evolution and Unpredictability](#)  
[Organisms Are Populations and Populations Are Organisms](#)  
[Thank You, Errors](#)  
[Learning from the Mistakes of Others](#)  
[How to Become Mother Teresa](#)  
[Why the Aggregate Hates the Individual](#)  
[What Does Not Kill Me Kills Others](#)  
[Me and Us](#)  
[National Entrepreneur Day](#)

## **BOOK II: MODERNITY AND THE DENIAL OF ANTIFRAGILITY**

### **Chapter 5. The Souk and the Office Building**

[Two Types of Professions](#)  
[Lenin in Zurich](#)  
[Bottom-up Variations](#)  
[Away from Extremistan](#)  
[The Great Turkey Problem](#)  
[Twelve Thousand Years](#)  
[War, Prison, or Both](#)  
[Pax Romana](#)  
[War or No War](#)

### **Chapter 6. Tell Them I Love (Some) Randomness**

[Hungry Donkeys](#)  
[Political Annealing](#)  
[That Time Bomb Called Stability](#)  
[The Second Step: Do \(Small\) Wars Save Lives?](#)  
[What to Tell the Foreign Policy Makers](#)  
[What Do We Call Here Modernity?](#)

### **Chapter 7. Naive Intervention**

[Intervention and Iatrogenics](#)  
[First, Do No Harm](#)  
[The Opposite of Iatrogenics](#)  
[Iatrogenics in High Places](#)  
[Can a Whale Fly Like an Eagle?](#)  
[Not Doing Nothing](#)  
[Non-Naive Interventionism](#)  
[In Praise of Procrastination—the Fabian Kind](#)  
[Neuroticism in Industrial Proportions](#)  
[A Legal Way to Kill People](#)  
[Media-Driven Neuroticism](#)  
[The State Can Help—When Incompetent](#)  
[France Is Messier than You Think](#)  
[Sweden and the Large State](#)  
[Catalyst-as-Cause Confusion](#)

## **Chapter 8. Prediction as a Child of Modernity**

*Ms. Bré Has Competitors*

*The Predictive*

*Plus or Minus Bad Teeth*

*The Idea of Becoming a Non-Turkey*

*No More Black Swans*

## **BOOK III: A NONPREDICTIVE VIEW OF THE WORLD**

## **Chapter 9. Fat Tony and the Fragilistas**

*Indolent Fellow Travelers*

*The Importance of Lunch*

*The Antifragility of Libraries*

*On Suckers and Nonsuckers*

*Loneliness*

*What the Nonpredictor Can Predict*

## **Chapter 10. Seneca's Upside and Downside**

*Is This Really Serious?*

*Less Downside from Life*

*Stoicism's Emotional Robustification*

*The Domestication of Emotions*

*How to Become the Master*

*The Foundational Asymmetry*

## **Chapter 11. Never Marry the Rock Star**

*On the Irreversibility of Broken Packages*

*Seneca's Barbell*

*The Accountant and the Rock Star*

*Away from the Golden Middle*

*The Domestication of Uncertainty*

## **BOOK IV: OPTIONALITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE INTELLIGENCE OF ANTIFRAGILITY**

*Do You Really Know Where You Are Going?*

*The Teleological Fallacy*

*America's Principal Asset*

## **Chapter 12. Thales' Sweet Grapes**

*Option and Asymmetry*

*The Options of Sweet Grapes*

*Saturday Evening in London*

*Your Rent*

*Asymmetry*

*Things That Like Dispersion*

*The Thalesian and the Aristotelian*

*How to Be Stupid*

*Nature and Options*

[The Rationality](#)  
[Life Is Long Gamma](#)  
[Roman Politics Likes Optionality](#)  
[Next](#)

## **Chapter 13. Lecturing Birds on How to Fly**

[Once More, Less Is More](#)  
[Mind the Gaps](#)  
[Search and How Errors Can Be Investments](#)  
[Creative and Uncreative Destructions](#)  
[The Soviet-Harvard Department of Ornithology](#)  
[Epiphenomena](#)  
[Greed as a Cause](#)  
[Debunking Epiphenomena](#)  
[Cherry-picking \(or the Fallacy of Confirmation\)](#)

## **Chapter 14. When Two Things Are Not the “Same Thing”**

[Where Are the Stressors?](#)  
[L’Art pour l’Art, to Learn for Learning’s Sake](#)  
[Polished Dinner Partners](#)  
[The Green Lumber Fallacy](#)  
[How Fat Tony Got Rich \(and Fat\)](#)  
[Conflation](#)  
[Prometheus and Epimetheus](#)

## **Chapter 15. History Written by the Losers**

[The Evidence Staring at Us](#)  
[Is It Like Cooking?](#)  
[The Industrial Revolution](#)  
[Governments Should Spend on Nonteleological Tinkering, Not Research](#)  
[The Case in Medicine](#)  
[Matt Ridley’s Anti-Teleological Argument](#)  
[Corporate Teleology](#)  
[The Inverse Turkey Problem](#)  
[To Fail Seven Times, Plus or Minus Two](#)  
[The Charlatan, the Academic, and the Showman](#)

## **Chapter 16. A Lesson in Disorder**

[The Ecological and the Ludic](#)  
[The Touristification of the Soccer Mom](#)  
[An Antifragile \(Barbell\) Education](#)

## **Chapter 17. Fat Tony Debates Socrates**

[Euthyphro](#)  
[Fat Tony Versus Socrates](#)  
[Primacy of Definitional Knowledge](#)  
[Mistaking the Unintelligible for the Unintelligent](#)  
[Tradition](#)  
[The Sucker-Nonsucker Distinction](#)  
[Fragility, Not Probability](#)  
[Conflation of Events and Exposure](#)  
[Conclusion to Book IV](#)



[What Will Happen Next?](#)

## **BOOK V: THE NONLINEAR AND THE NONLINEAR**

[On the Importance of Attics](#)

### **Chapter 18. On the Difference Between a Large Stone and a Thousand Pebbles**

[A Simple Rule to Detect the Fragile](#)

[Why Is Fragility Nonlinear?](#)

[When to Smile and When to Frown](#)

[Why Is the Concave Hurt by Black Swan Events?](#)

[Traffic in New York](#)

[Someone Call New York City Officials](#)

[Where More Is Different](#)

[A “Balanced Meal”](#)

[Run, Don’t Walk](#)

[Small May Be Ugly, It Is Certainly Less Fragile](#)

[How to Be Squeezed](#)

[Kerviel and Micro-Kerviel](#)

[How to Exit a Movie Theater](#)

[Projects and Prediction](#)

[Why Planes Don’t Arrive Early](#)

[Wars, Deficits, and Deficits](#)

[Where the “Efficient” Is Not Efficient](#)

[Pollution and Harm to the Planet](#)

[The Nonlinearity of Wealth](#)

[Conclusion](#)

### **Chapter 19. The Philosopher’s Stone and Its Inverse**

[How to Detect Who Will Go Bust](#)

[The Idea of Positive and Negative Model Error](#)

[How to Lose a Grandmother](#)

[Now the Philosopher’s Stone](#)

[How to Transform Gold into Mud: The Inverse Philosopher’s Stone](#)

## **BOOK VI: VIA NEGATIVA**

[Where Is the Charlatan?](#)

[Subtractive Knowledge](#)

[Barbells, Again](#)

[Less Is More](#)

### **Chapter 20. Time and Fragility**

[From Simonides to Jensen](#)

[Learning to Subtract](#)

[Technology at Its Best](#)

[To Age in Reverse: The Lindy Effect](#)

[A Few Mental Biases](#)

[Neomania and Treadmill Effects](#)

[Architecture and the Irreversible Neomania](#)

[Wall to Wall Windows](#)  
[Metrification](#)  
[Turning Science into Journalism](#)  
[What Should Break](#)  
[Prophets and the Present](#)  
[Empedocles' Dog](#)  
[What Does Not Make Sense](#)

## **Chapter 21. Medicine, Convexity, and Opacity**

[How to Argue in an Emergency Room](#)  
[First Principle of Iatrogenics \(Empiricism\)](#)  
[Second Principle of Iatrogenics \(Nonlinearity in Response\)](#)  
[Jensen's Inequality in Medicine](#)  
[Burying the Evidence](#)  
[The Never-ending History of Turkey Situations](#)  
[Nature's Opaque Logic](#)  
[Guilty or Innocent](#)  
[Plead Ignorance of Biology: Phenomenology](#)  
[The Ancients Were More Caustic](#)  
[How to Medicate Half the Population](#)  
[The "Rigor of Mathematics" in Medicine](#)  
[Next](#)

## **Chapter 22. To Live Long, but Not Too Long**

[Life Expectancy and Convexity](#)  
[Subtraction Adds to Your Life](#)  
[The Iatrogenics of Money](#)  
[Religion and Naive Interventionism](#)  
[If It's Wednesday, I Must Be Vegan](#)  
[Convexity Effects and Random Nutrition](#)  
[How to Eat Yourself](#)  
[Walk-Deprived](#)  
[I Want to Live Forever](#)

# **BOOK VII: THE ETHICS OF FRAGILITY AND ANTIFRAGILITY**

## **Chapter 23. Skin in the Game: Antifragility and Optionality at the Expense of Others**

[Hammurabi](#)  
[The Talker's Free Option](#)  
[Postdicting](#)  
[The Stiglitz Syndrome](#)  
[The Problem of Frequency, or How to Lose Arguments](#)  
[The Right Decision for the Wrong Reason](#)  
[The Ancients and the Stiglitz Syndrome](#)  
[To Burn One's Vessels](#)  
[How Poetry Can Kill You](#)  
[The Problem of Insulation](#)  
[Champagne Socialism](#)

[\*Soul in the Game\*](#)

[Options, Antifragility, and Social Fairness](#)

[\*The Robert Rubin Free Option\*](#)

[\*Which Adam Smith?\*](#)

[The Antifragility and Ethics of \(Large\) Corporations](#)

[\*Artisans, Marketing, and the Cheapest to Deliver\*](#)

[\*Lawrence of Arabia or Meyer Lansky\*](#)

[Next](#)

## **Chapter 24. Fitting Ethics to a Profession**

[\*Wealth Without Independence\*](#)

[The Professionals and the Collective](#)

[The Ethical and the Legal](#)

[\*Casuistry as Optionality\*](#)

[Big Data and the Researcher's Option](#)

[The Tyranny of the Collective](#)

## **Chapter 25. Conclusion**

[Epilogue](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Appendix I](#)

[Appendix II](#)

[Additional Notes, Afterthoughts, and Further Reading](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[\*Other Books by This Author\*](#)

[\*About the Author\*](#)

# Chapter Summaries and Map

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*Boldface terms are in the [Glossary](#).*

## **BOOK I: THE ANTIFRAGILE: AN INTRODUCTION**

**CHAPTER 1.** Explains how we missed the word “antifragility” in classrooms. Fragile-Robust-Antifragile as Damocles-Phoenix-Hydra. Domain dependence.

**CHAPTER 2.** Where we find overcompensation. Obsessive love is the most antifragile thing outside of economics.

**CHAPTER 3.** The difference between the organic and the engineered. **Touristification** and attempts to suck volatility out of life.

**CHAPTER 4.** The antifragility of the whole often depends on the fragility of the parts. Why death is a necessity for life. The benefits of errors for the collective. Why we need risk takers. A few remarks about modernity missing the point. A salute to the entrepreneur and risk taker.

## **BOOK II: MODERNITY AND THE DENIAL OF ANTIFRAGILITY**

### **THE PROCRUSTEAN BED**

**CHAPTER 5.** Two different randomness categories, seen through the profiles of two brothers. How Switzerland is not controlled from above. The difference between **Mediocristan** and **Extremistan**. The virtues of city-states, bottom-up political systems, and the stabilizing effect of municipal noise.

**CHAPTER 6.** Systems that like randomness. Annealing inside and outside physics. Explains the effect of overstabilizing organisms and complex systems (political, economic, etc.). The defects of

intellectualism. U.S. foreign policy, and pseudostabilization.

[CHAPTER 7](#). An introduction to **naive intervention** and **iatrogenics**, the most neglected product of modernity. Noise and signal and overintervening from noise.

[CHAPTER 8](#). Prediction as the child of modernity.

### BOOK III: A NONPREDICTIVE VIEW OF THE WORLD

[CHAPTER 9](#). Fat Tony, the smeller of fragility, Nero, long lunches, and squeezing the **fragilistas**.

[CHAPTER 10](#). In which Professor Triffat refuses his own medicine and we use Seneca and stoicism as a back door to explain why everything antifragile has to have more upside than downside and hence benefits from volatility, error, and stressors—the **fundamental asymmetry**.

[CHAPTER 11](#). What to mix and not to mix. The **barbell strategy** in life and things as the transformation of anything from fragile to antifragile.

### BOOK IV: OPTIONALITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE INTELLIGENCE OF ANTIFRAGILITY

(The tension between education, which loves order, and innovation, which loves disorder.)

[CHAPTER 12](#). Thales versus Aristotle, and the notion of **optionality**, which allows you not to know what's going on—why it has been misunderstood owing to the conflation. How Aristotle missed the point. Optionality in private life. Conditions under which tinkering outperforms design. **Rational flâneur**.

[CHAPTER 13](#). Asymmetric payoffs behind growth, little else. The **Soviet-Harvard illusion**, or the lecturing-birds-how-to-fly effect. Epiphenomena.

[CHAPTER 14](#). **The green lumber fallacy**. Tension between episteme and trial and error, and the role through history. Does knowledge generate wealth, and if so, which knowledge? When two things are not the same thing.

[CHAPTER 15](#). Rewriting the history of technology. How, in science, history is rewritten by the losers and how I saw it in my own business and how we can generalize. Does knowledge of biology hurt medicine? Hiding the role of luck. What makes a good entrepreneur?

**CHAPTER 16.** How to deal with Soccer Moms. The education of a **flâneur**.

**CHAPTER 17.** Fat Tony argues with Socrates. Why can't we do things we can't explain, and why do we have to explain things we do? The **Dionysian**. The sucker-nonsucker approach to things.

## **BOOK V: THE NONLINEAR AND THE NONLINEAR**

**CHAPTER 18.** **Convexity, concavity,** and convexity effects. Why size fragilizes.

**CHAPTER 19.** **The Philosopher's Stone.** Deeper into convexity. How Fannie Mae went bust. Nonlinearity. The heuristic to detect fragility and antifragility. Convexity biases, **Jensen's inequality**, and their impact on ignorance.

## **BOOK VI: VIA NEGATIVA**

**CHAPTER 20.** **Neomania.** Looking at the future by *via negativa*. The **Lindy effect**: the old outlives the new in proportion to its age. **Empedocles' Tile.** Why the irrational has an edge over the perceived-to-be-rational.

**CHAPTER 21.** Medicine and asymmetry. Decision rules in medical problems: why the very ill has a convex payoff and the healthy has concave exposures.

**CHAPTER 22.** Medicine by subtraction. Introduces the match between individuals and the type of randomness in the environment. Why I don't want to live forever.

## **BOOK VII: THE ETHICS OF FRAGILITY AND ANTIFRAGILITY**

**CHAPTER 23.** The **agency problem** as transfer of fragility. **Skin in the game.** **Doxastic commitment**, or **soul in the game.** The **Robert Rubin problem**, the **Joseph Stiglitz problem**, and the **Alan Blinder problem**, all three about agency, and one about **cherry-picking**.

**CHAPTER 24.** **Ethical inversion.** The collective can be wrong while individuals know it. How people are trapped into an opinion, and how to set them free.

**CHAPTER 25.** Conclusion.

**EPILOGUE.** What happens when Nero leaves to go to the Levant to observe the rite of Adonis.

# Prologue



# I. HOW TO LOVE THE WIND

Wind extinguishes a candle and energizes fire.

Likewise with randomness, uncertainty, chaos: you want to use them, not hide from them. You want to be the fire and wish for the wind. This summarizes this author's nonmeek attitude to randomness and uncertainty.

We just don't want to just survive uncertainty, to just about make it. We want to survive uncertainty and, in addition—like a certain class of aggressive Roman Stoics—have the last word. The mission is how to domesticate, even dominate, even conquer, the unseen, the opaque, and the inexplicable.

How?



## II. THE ANTIFRAGILE

Some things benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile.

Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better. This property is behind everything that has changed with time: evolution, culture, ideas, revolutions, political systems, technological innovation, cultural and economic success, corporate survival, good recipes (say, chicken soup or steak tartare with a drop of cognac), the rise of cities, cultures, legal systems, equatorial forests, bacterial resistance ... even our own existence as a species on this planet. And antifragility determines the boundary between what is living and organic (or complex), say, the human body, and what is inert, say, a physical object like the stapler on your desk.

The antifragile loves randomness and uncertainty, which also means—crucially—a love of errors, a certain class of errors. Antifragility has a singular property of allowing us to deal with the unknown, to do things without understanding them—and do them well. Let me be more aggressive: we are largely better at doing than we are at thinking, thanks to antifragility. I'd rather be dumb and antifragile than extremely smart and fragile, any time.

It is easy to see things around us that like a measure of stressors and volatility: economic systems, your body, your nutrition (diabetes and many similar modern ailments seem to be associated with a lack of randomness in feeding and the absence of the stressor of occasional starvation), your psyche. There are even financial contracts that are antifragile: they are explicitly designed to benefit from market volatility.

Antifragility makes us understand fragility better. Just as we cannot improve health without reducing disease, or increase wealth without first decreasing losses, antifragility and fragility are degrees on a spectrum.

### ***Nonprediction***

By grasping the mechanisms of antifragility we can build a systematic and broad guide to *nonpredictive* decision making under uncertainty in business, politics, medicine, and life in general—anywhere the unknown preponderates, any situation in which there is randomness, unpredictability, opacity, or incomplete understanding of things.

It is far easier to figure out if something is fragile than to predict the occurrence of an event that may harm it. Fragility can be measured; risk is not measurable (outside of casinos or the minds of people who call themselves “risk experts”). This provides a solution to what I’ve called the Black Swan problem—the impossibility of calculating the risks of consequential rare events and predicting their occurrence. Sensitivity to harm from volatility is tractable, more so than forecasting the event that would cause the harm. So we propose to stand our current approaches to prediction, prognostication, and risk management on their heads.

In every domain or area of application, we propose rules for moving from the fragile toward the antifragile, through reduction of fragility or harnessing antifragility. And we can almost always detect antifragility (and fragility) using a simple test of asymmetry: anything that has more upside than downside from random events (or certain shocks) is antifragile; the reverse is fragile.

## ***Deprivation of Antifragility***

Crucially, if antifragility is the property of all those natural (and complex) systems that have survived, depriving these systems of volatility, randomness, and stressors will harm them. They will weaken, die, or blow up. We have been fragilizing the economy, our health, political life, education, almost everything ... by suppressing randomness and volatility. Just as spending a month in bed (preferably with an unabridged version of *War and Peace* and access to *The Sopranos*’ entire eighty-six episodes) leads to muscle atrophy, complex systems are weakened, even killed, when deprived of stressors. Much of our modern, structured, world has been harming us with top-down policies and contraptions (dubbed “Soviet-Harvard delusions” in the book) which do precisely this: an insult to the antifragility of systems.

This is the tragedy of modernity: as with neurotically overprotective

parents, those trying to help are often hurting us the most.

If about everything top-down fragilizes and blocks antifragility and growth, everything bottom-up thrives under the right amount of stress and disorder. The process of discovery (or innovation, or technological progress) itself depends on antifragile tinkering, aggressive risk bearing rather than formal education.

## ***Upside at the Expense of Others***

Which brings us to the largest fragilizer of society, and greatest generator of crises, absence of “skin in the game.” Some become antifragile at the expense of others by getting the upside (or gains) from volatility, variations, and disorder and exposing others to the downside risks of losses or harm. And such *antifragility-at-the-cost-of-fragility-of-others* is hidden—given the blindness to antifragility by the Soviet-Harvard intellectual circles, this asymmetry is rarely identified and (so far) never taught. Further, as we discovered during the financial crisis that started in 2008, these blowup risks-to-others are easily concealed owing to the growing complexity of modern institutions and political affairs. While in the past people of rank or status were those and only those who took risks, who had the downside for their actions, and heroes were those who did so for the sake of others, today the exact reverse is taking place. We are witnessing the rise of a new class of inverse heroes, that is, bureaucrats, bankers, Davos-attending members of the I.A.N.D. (International Association of Name Droppers), and academics with too much power and no real downside and/or accountability. They game the system while citizens pay the price.

At no point in history have so many non-risk-takers, that is, those with no personal exposure, exerted so much control.

The chief ethical rule is the following: Thou shalt not have antifragility at the expense of the fragility of others.

### III. THE ANTIDOTE TO THE BLACK SWAN

I want to live happily in a world I don't understand.

Black Swans (capitalized) are large-scale unpredictable and irregular events of massive consequence—unpredicted by a certain observer, and such unpredictor is generally called the “turkey” when he is both surprised and harmed by these events. I have made the claim that most of history comes from Black Swan events, while we worry about fine-tuning our understanding of the ordinary, and hence develop models, theories, or representations that cannot possibly track them or measure the possibility of these shocks.

Black Swans hijack our brains, making us feel we “sort of” or “almost” predicted them, because they are retrospectively explainable. We don't realize the role of these Swans in life because of this illusion of predictability. Life is more, a lot more, labyrinthine than shown in our memory—our minds are in the business of turning history into something smooth and linear, which makes us underestimate randomness. But when we see it, we fear it and overreact. Because of this fear and thirst for order, some human systems, by disrupting the invisible or not so visible logic of things, tend to be exposed to harm from Black Swans and almost never get any benefit. You get pseudo-order when you seek order; you only get a measure of order and control when you embrace randomness.

Complex systems are full of interdependencies—hard to detect—and nonlinear responses. “Nonlinear” means that when you double the dose of, say, a medication, or when you double the number of employees in a factory, you don't get twice the initial effect, but rather a lot more or a lot less. Two weekends in Philadelphia are not twice as pleasant as a single one—I've tried. When the response is plotted on a graph, it does not show as a straight line (“linear”), rather as a curve. In such environment, simple causal associations are misplaced; it is hard to see how things work by looking at single parts.

Man-made complex systems tend to develop cascades and runaway chains of reactions that decrease, even eliminate, predictability and cause outsized events. So the modern world may be increasing in technological knowledge, but, paradoxically, it is making things a lot more unpredictable. Now for reasons that have to do with the increase of the