

## ANTIFRAGILE READING GROUP

### DESCRIPTION

Why do some ideas work in theory but fail in practice? In a world filled with uncertainty, Taleb argues there are specific errors that academics, policymakers, and other experts often fall victim to—and with potentially dire and disillusioning consequences. In this group, we'll examine such errors through the vastly interdisciplinary lens of Nassim Taleb's *Antifragile* and discuss their foundations and implications.

### AGENDA

We'll begin the first couple weeks examining common logical fallacies, considering the nature of knowledge and randomness, and defining and exploring the concept of antifragility. We'll build on this to examine the role of modernity and its impact on fragility across a variety of disciplines and domains. We'll then move into discussions on education, innovation, and disorder, with special attention to fallacies that sew a disconnect between theory and practice. We'll consider the relationship between time and antifragility and discuss what it means to be rational in this context. Finally, we'll dive into the ethics of fragility/antifragility, the integral concept of skin in the game, and how these impact the world today.

This group is structured to be discussion-driven and student led, and therefore the schedule, focus, and other logistics will remain flexible to meet the needs and interests of those with *skin in the game*.

### TEXTS

#### **Primary:**

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. Random House, 2012.

#### **Supplemental (Excerpts or Articles):**

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *The Black Swan*. Random House, 2007.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *Skin in the Game*. Random House, 2018.

Taleb, N. N. (2018, March 10). *What do I mean by skin in the game? My own version*. Medium. <https://medium.com/incerto/what-do-i-mean-by-skin-in-the-game-my-own-version-cc858dc73260>

### THE TEXT IN CONTEXT

Published in 2012, *Antifragile* is the fourth installment of Nassim Taleb's *Incerto*, an "investigation of opacity, luck, uncertainty, probability, human error, risk, and decision making when we don't understand the world, expressed in the form of a personal essay with autobiographical sections, stories, parables, and philosophical, historical, and scientific discussions in nonoverlapping

volumes that can be accessed in any order. The main thread is that while there is inordinate uncertainty about what is going on, there is great certainty as to what one should do about it.”

From the Book: “[*Antifragile* is] on how some things like disorder (hence volatility, time, chaos, variability, and stressors) while others don’t, how we can classify things along the lines fragile-robust-antifragile, how we can identify (anti)fragility based on nonlinear response without having to know much about the history of the process (which solves most of the Black Swan problem), and why you are alive if and only if you love (some) volatility.”

We’ll also draw on other sources including two of Taleb’s other books, *The Black Swan* and *Skin in the Game*.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, in his words, “spent twenty-one years as a risk taker before becoming a researcher in philosophical, mathematical, and mostly (very) practical problems with probability.” We’ll learn more about the author throughout the text.

## DISCUSSION OUTLINE AND SCHEDULE

### Week 1:

- Introduction of group members and the text.
- Readings:
  - *Antifragile*
    - Prologue: pp. **3 – 27**
    - Book I Introduction: p. **29**
    - Chapter 1 (Between Damocles and Hydra): pp. **31 – 40**
- Errors to Discuss: *Logical Fallacies, Naïve Rationalism*
- Ideas to Discuss: *Antifragility, Black Swans, Nonpredictive Decision Making, Domain Dependence/Independence*

### Week 2:

- Readings:
  - *Antifragile*
    - Book II Introduction: p. **81**
    - Chapter 5 (The Souk and the Office Building): pp. **83 – 99**
    - Chapter 6 (Tell Them I Love (Some) Randomness): pp. **100 – 109**
  - *The Black Swan*
    - Postscript Essay Parts VI and VII (on Fourth Quadrant): pp. **361 – 373**
- Errors to Discuss: *Procrustean Bed, Turkey Problem*
- Ideas to Discuss: *Four Quadrants, Professions, Techne vs. Episteme, Volatility as Stability*

### Week 3:

- Readings
  - *Antifragile*
    - Chapter 7 (Naïve Intervention): pp. **110 – 133**
    - Chapter 8 (Prediction as a Child of Modernity): pp. **134 – 139**
    - Book III Introduction: p. **141**
    - Chapter 9 (Fat Tony and the Fragilistas): pp. **143-150**
- Errors to Discuss: *Agency Problem, Naïve Interventionism*
- Ideas to Discuss: *Iatrogenics, Doing Nothing, Prediction vs. Antifragilizing, Fat Tony*

### Week 4:

- Readings:
  - *Antifragile*
    - Book IV Introduction: pp. **169 – 171**
    - Chapter 12 (Thales' Sweet Grapes): pp. **173 – 186**
    - Chapter 13 (Lecturing Birds on How to Fly): pp. **187 – 201**
    - Chapter 14 (When Two Things Are Not the "Same Thing"): pp. **202 – 216**
  - *The Black Swan*
    - Table 4 (Two Ways to Approach Randomness) on p. **284**

- Errors to Discuss: *Teleological & Ludic Fallacies, Cherry Picking, Lecturing-Birds-How-To-Fly-Effect, Green Lumber Fallacy*
- Ideas to Discuss: *Asymmetry and Optionality, Two Types of Knowledge, Epiphenomena, Education*

#### Week 5:

- Readings:
  - *Antifragile*
    - Chapter 15 (History Written by the Losers): pp. **217 – 240**
    - Chapter 16 (A Lesson In Disorder): pp. **241 – 248**
    - Chapter 17 (Fat Tony Debates Socrates): pp. **249 – 262**
  - *Skin in the Game*
    - Prologue, Part 1 (Antaeus Whacked): pp. **7 – 15**
- Errors to Discuss: *Inverse Turkey*
- Ideas to Discuss: *Theoreticians vs. Practitioners, Unintelligible vs. Unintelligent, The Future?, Interventionistas/Fragilistas*

#### Week 6:

- Readings:
  - *Antifragile*
    - Chapter 20 (Time and Fragility): pp. **309 – 335**
    - Book VII Introduction: p. **373**
    - Chapter 23 (Skin in the Game): pp. **375 – 406**
  - *Skin in the Game*
    - Chapter 19 (The Logic of Risk Taking): pp. **222 – 233**
  - Handout: *Ensemble vs. Time Probability*
  - Optional: *What do I mean by Skin in the Game? My Own Version* (Medium Article)
- Errors to Discuss: *Neomania, Joseph Stiglitz Problem, Bob Rubin Trade/Robert Rubin Violation, Rent-Seeking*
- Ideas to Discuss: *Technology, Lindy Effect, Neomania, SITG, Corporations, Probability*

#### Week 7:

- Readings:
  - *Antifragile*
    - Chapter 24 (Fitting Ethics to a Profession): pp. **407 – 420**
    - Chapter 25 (Conclusion): pp. **421 – 423**
    - Epilogue: pp. **425 – 426**
  - *Skin in the Game*
    - Epilogue (What Lindy Told Me): pp. **234 – 236**
    - Optional: Chapter 5 (Life in the Simulation Machine): pp. **119 – 122**
    - Optional: Chapter 6 (The Intellectual Yet Idiot): pp. **123 – 127**
- Errors to Discuss: *Alan Blinder Problem, Ethical Inversion*
- Ideas to Discuss: *Ethical Implications, Metaphors, Recent Elections, Final Thoughts*