

# Is work slavery?

by KENT THUNE - August 1st, 2014, 12:45pm

<http://www.ritholtz.com/blog/2014/08/is-work-slavery-taleb-thinks-so/>

**“By setting oneself totally free of constraints, free of thoughts, free of this debilitating activity called work, free of efforts, elements hidden in the texture of reality start staring at you; then mysteries that you never thought existed emerge in front of your eyes.” ~ Nassim Nicholas Taleb**

Readers of this blog are likely aware of Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s first two books, his 2001 debut, *Foiled by Randomness*, and his 2007 work, *The Black Swan*, which are based upon Taleb’s central idea: “our blindness with respect to randomness, particularly large deviations,” which speaks directly to the common follies of investors.

I recently read (and enjoyed) his 2010 book of aphorisms, *Bed of Procrustes*. In Greek mythology, Procrustes was the cruel owner of an estate where he would entertain traveling guests for dinner then offer them a place to rest. To make them fit his special bed, he would chop off their limbs or stretch them if they were too small. This works well as a metaphor for the modern world, where social conventions shape us into whatever fits its demands. And as individuals we resolve our tensions, as Taleb describes, “by squeezing life and the world into crisp commoditized ideas...” (Note: Barry has a similar and interesting take on investing with what he calls the danger of narratives.)

Although Taleb covers several topics in *Procrustes*, the one that struck me the most was his blunt comparisons of employment to slavery, a theme that finds itself often in my own philosophical observations (and rants).

Here are a few select aphorisms from the book, followed by a few of my own notes (I’d also love to hear any of your thoughts in comments that the quotes or notes may provoke):

Work destroys your soul by stealthily invading your brain during the hours not officially spent working; be selective about professions.

The three most harmful addictions are heroin, carbohydrates, and a monthly salary.

If you know, in the morning, what your day looks like with any precision, you are a little bit dead—the more precision, the more dead you are.

Those who do not think that employment is systemic slavery are either blind or employed.

The difference between technology and slavery is that slaves are fully aware that they are not free.

You have a real life if and only if you do not compete with anyone in any of your pursuits.

My perspective is similar to that of Aristotle's: You're not working if you love what you do; therefore, in this case, one's profession is not slavery. But how many are fortunate enough to love what they do? It is normal to either dislike (or, at a minimum, tolerate) one's work. But normal is not healthy.

The tension arising from "fitting ourselves" into the Procrustean bed of engaging in work that we do not love is, at the root, and in my humble opinion, the reason people invest their money and it is the creator of the modern idea of retirement.

We give up our freedom now for freedom later, a freedom we believe can only be purchased with money.