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BOOK REVIEW

Thinking Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2011. 512 pp. $16. ISBN 978-0374275631.

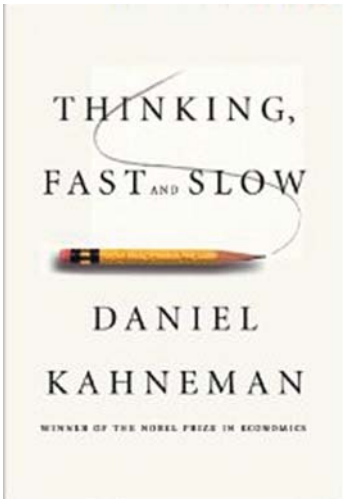
Passing through an airport recently, I happened to notice *Thinking Fast and Slow* on a rack in the bookstore, alongside *The Racketeer* by John Grisham, *Inferno* by Dan Brown, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James. Having read Kahneman's book, I knew that it lacked the sex, action, and pop appeal that these other books offered, but that what it was short of in these characteristics it made up for in depth and revelation, offering an unfamiliar form of intrigue—something personal rather than scandalous—altogether riveting.

Since its first release in 2011, *Thinking Fast and Slow* has received an overwhelming number of glowing reviews. One pronounces Kahneman "the world's greatest living psychologist;" others describe the book as "one of the greatest and most engaging collections of insights into the human mind" and "a masterpiece." While these are well-deserved accolades, what earned Kahneman the Nobel Prize in economics and has gotten his book onto the rack of popular best-sellers isn't just the theories or the research but rather the surprise and self-reflection his pulling together of this amazing body of knowledge evokes.

More than 100 years ago, Sigmund Freud's book *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* drew a similarly widespread public response. Freud's book identified the key signs in ordinary life of the underlying "pathology" of the psyche: forgetfulness, "lapsus linguae" (slips of the tongue), and "parapraxis" (apparently random actions). And it made the "unconscious" and such familiar notions as "Freudian slips" part of our everyday thinking; it had, and still has, a profound effect on how we think about, and understand, ourselves.

In much the same way, but in what seems a far more inviting, and refreshingly contemporary, style, Kahneman lays out for his readers a system by which to identify the irrational cognitive mechanisms of everyday life. To achieve this, he weaves decades of his, and others' research with common life events with which readers can easily identify.

Much as Freud did with contrasting notions of conscious and unconscious and *Id* and *Ego*, Kahneman does with his two 'systems' which he emphasizes are just heuristics invented to make it easier to talk



about how we think. One is intuitive and emotionally influenced, making it a fast and generally effective "machine for jumping to conclusions." The other serves to more rigorously check and correct the first system's conclusions.

System 1, *fast thinking*, is something that we do all day long at an automatic and largely subconscious level. Not only is it what underlies our snap decisions and intuitive opinions, it is the source of explicit beliefs and deliberate choices that our conscious mind uses to explain our behaviors. As Kahneman acknowledges, System 1 is generally pretty good at carrying out this role, leading us to trust it. However, we pay a high price for speed, by simplifying tasks, assuming that what we know is all we need to know, and jumping to conclusions based on limited (and sometimes insufficient) information.

System 2, *slow thinking*, on the other hand, is effortful, focused, and deliberate, and not something we do as often as we might think. Since it requires intention and mental energy, System 2, which is the kind of thinking often required for good (truly thought out) decisions, tires us easily and we are naturally reluctant to invest more effort than is strictly necessary. Thus, we are inclined to be 'lazy' and to go along with whatever our fast-thinking mind suggests.

To illustrate and contrast these two systems, Kahneman offers these activities:

> answering 2 + 2 = ? vs. calculating 17 × 24 = ?
> driving on a quiet road vs. making a left turn in dense traffic
> orienting to a loud voice in a crowd vs. listening to the loud voice's conversation

Once his theme is established, Kahneman presents a collage of findings spanning more than forty years showing how the sleek and fast System 1, that works well enough under most circumstances, can lead to irrational biases and intruding effects. A talented writer as well as a competent researcher, Kahneman carries us from demonstration studies to events in the real world, to activities in our own internal mental worlds through which we, the readers, can observe what happens.

Filling much of the remaining 300 pages are too many observations to even attempt to summarize. Here are a few examples:

- When experienced German judges roll a pair of dice loaded to give either a low or high number, those with the higher number impose longer jail sentences in immediate trials—the *Anchoring Effect* or influence of irrelevant numbers
- Students, after being presented with a set of words which evoke thoughts of old age (Florida, forgetful, bald, gray, and wrinkled), walk more slowly than usual—*Priming Effect* in which thoughts and behavior are unknowingly influenced
- Professional golfers "try harder and are more successful when putting for par (to avoid a bogey) than when putting for a birdie"— *Loss Aversion*
- The trading records of 10,000 brokerage accounts show that: "on average, the shares that individual traders sold did (substantially) better than those they bought"—*Illusion of Validity*
- Individuals are more likely to opt for surgery if they are told that the "survival" rate is 90 percent, rather than that the mortality rate is 10 percent—*Framing*
- When asked whether "Ford (F) stock is a good investment," subjects base their answers on available, but not really relevant, data such as whether they like Ford cars—*WYSIATI* ("what you see is all there is")

In later chapters, Kahneman shifts his focus introducing two more heuristics: the "experiencing self, which does the living" and the "remembering self, which keeps score and makes the choices."

He discusses how, in the 1990s when happiness became a popular focus for the emerging Positive Psychology movement, researchers relied on retrospective polls about life satisfaction. In contrast to these questionnaires which attempted to measure "remembered" well-being, Kahneman offers an alternative that assesses "pleasure" (or pain) from moment to moment which can then be summed over time. These two approaches produce very different results with the "remembering self" rating an experience by the peak (or valley) of the experience and by the feelings when it ended, rather than by the duration or extent of the feeling.

For example, patients undergoing painful colonoscopies were divided into two groups. Group A got the regular procedure while Group B unknowingly received a few extra minutes of less painful discomfort at the end of the examination. Although they received more total discomfort, the less painful ending led Group B to view the whole affair as less unpleasant.

In the same way, vacations and overall life itself are judged/remembered by the peaks and valleys, and conclusions rather than in their totality leading Kahneman to write: "Odd as it may seem, I am my remembering self, and the experiencing self, who does my living, is like a stranger to me."

Toward the conclusion, he raises the question as to whether a lifetime of research (and all this knowledge about thinking) has made Kahneman himself a better thinker. No, he writes, confessing that

> except for some effects that [I] attribute mostly to age, [my] intuitive thinking is just as prone to overconfidence, extreme predictions, and the planning fallacy as it was before [I] made a study of the issues.

And as if to challenge us, he warns that "it is much easier, as well as far more enjoyable, to identify and label the mistakes of others than to recognize our own."

If you choose to read *Thinking Fast and Slow* (and I genuinely think you should), be prepared to question your own decisions and opinions both past and present. Your mind (and my mind and seemingly everyone's mind) pretends to be cautious and thoughtful when often it simplifies, confabulates, and wildly jumps to conclusions. It doesn't just let you remember what you experienced but rather what it chooses as your memories.

This book is about how your mind has a mind of its own; it's a fascinating read—an unusual best-seller and something that even Freud's ghost would find provocative.

Tana Dineen