

Thinking Fast and Slow

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Welcoming our third son Ezra, into our family has been amazing. Exhausting, but amazing. For those of you who are parents out there, I know you can appreciate the cognitive dissonance I'm describing: that children are incredibly hard work, and are sleep terrorists, but at the same time, the moment Ezra smiled and laughed at me was one of the best moments of my life.

Since Ezra came home, one of the questions I'm regularly asked is: how are Benji and Micah taking to their new brother? I quickly answer everyone honestly: they are trying to love him to death. I can't count the number of conversations I've had with them both, ending in: please don't hug him so hard! Or please be more gentle with him!

That sense of impulsivity that my boys are struggling with is crucial for us to understand Moses. Moses' first action in the Torah is impulsive and violent with only a momentary pause: Exodus 2:11 ...He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. (12) He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

In fact, almost every interaction Moses has in our portion is reactionary: shortly thereafter the text recounts: [Moses] arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well. (16) Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; (17) but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock.

I could bring you so many more moments from throughout the Torah, where Moses reacts to the situation in front of him. Some of the reactions are getting into good trouble as Civil Rights Icon John Lewis calls it: defending the innocent daughters of the priest of midian as the prime example. Yet, a prominent midrash, or Rabbinic legend, claims that it is this overwhelming desire to react, to throw the tablets down in rage, to strike the rock instead of asking it for water, to kill the egyptian without deeper thought: these impulsive acts were why Moses was forbidden to enter the promised land.

We are often in a position where we are thinking faster than is good for us. Where we would benefit from taking a pause, and try to think our way to the best solution. For Moses, this fast, reactive way of thinking had harsh consequences. Thinking too fast can also lead to a life and death situation. Shakar Vedantam shared a story on Hidden Brain last week:

“The fight was over a pair of gym shoes at night on the South Side of Chicago, and this is what came of it. One teenager faces years in prison. Another, a boy of just 15, is dead...[the dead boy’s grandfather, congressman Danny Davis said: ...: I grieve for my family. I grieve for the young man who pulled the trigger. I grieve for his family, his parents, his friends, some of whom will never see him again...”¹

For that young man: he will forever be defined by the worst thing he’s ever done. Something he did far too fast, and if he had given himself the space to pause and reflect, it’s a choice he never would have made: potentially a lifetime in prison over a pair of sneakers. I know I can look back at my life and find countless moments where I thought too fast, reacted in haste, and hurt others and myself. I’ve ruined relationships, hurt those I’ve loved, and caused strife when there could have been calm: all because I thought too fast, instead of slowing down.

Danny Kahneman the Israeli nobel prize winning psychologist, helped define this dual way of thinking. Up till now I’ve shared many examples of how we think fast, which he calls System 1: which operates automatically and quickly with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. What all the situations till now could benefit from, is the other way of thinking, slow thinking, which he calls System 2: the focused thinking that allows for us to focus on something far away, that gives us the strength to ponder and figure out the best solution. We need both systems to function in the world: System one takes over on a drive: it is the countless ways in which we are able to do routine tasks without carefully unpacking all the small necessary actions we need to take to survive in a car. It’s our unconscious, easily reactive brain that does so much of our routine work. System two would be debilitating in a car: we’d overthink braking, and slam into the car in front of us.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/794016613>

Both systems, working together, are what help us function in this complex world we live in: the hardest part is training ourselves to recognize when to use one system or the other.

We live in a world that often offers us a false reward for thinking fast: every buzz and ping on our cell phones are designed to activate our system 1 thinking, and get us to responsively check, to get that small rush of endorphins that tell us we're important, that whatever it is, it needs to be handled now, regardless of the consequences. To think more slowly, to use that system 2 part of our brain would ask us to pause before we check and wonder: why am I reacting this way? Why do I feel the need to look at my phone while I'm driving thus endangering myself and everyone around me? I'm of course describing what other people might do not myself.

One of the most powerful examples of slow thinking, is the hard work of the civil rights movement over 50 years ago. Every year, I'm honored to walk in the footsteps of Dr. King, who we honor on Monday, and hear from people who lived through the riots, lived through the march on Washington, and lived through bloody Sunday. I heard them share time and again, how they built the resilience to think slowly, and to avoid the reactions that others were trying to get out of them.

Each year, I listen to the story of Joanne Bland, a woman who was brutally beaten on Bloody Sunday, in 1965 in Selma. She shares about her attempts to integrate the lunch counter in Selma: how she and all the other people in SNICC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, were carefully trained to reframe their reflexes, and to sit there quietly as people put cigarettes out in their hair, as screaming was punishing their ears, and as salt was poured in their coffee. It was their work, and the work of nonviolence throughout the civil rights movement that moved the needle, and changed the conversation about civil rights. It was the slow thinking and using System two to avoid the obvious reactions that changed our society for the better.

System 1 thinking is not the enemy and System 2 thinking is not a panacea: the hard part for us all is determining which system we need for which situation. When should we react when should we ponder? When should we sit and think when do we need to get into Good trouble and make a difference?