

Daniel Kahneman – Thought and Action

Mark Dixon - October 2016

A few years ago I read a fantastic book about experimental psychology by Daniel Kahneman.

I want to tell you about it this morning. The book essentially charts his life's work in the field, the experiments he carried out and the possible conclusions he made, many of which were surprising and counter-intuitive.

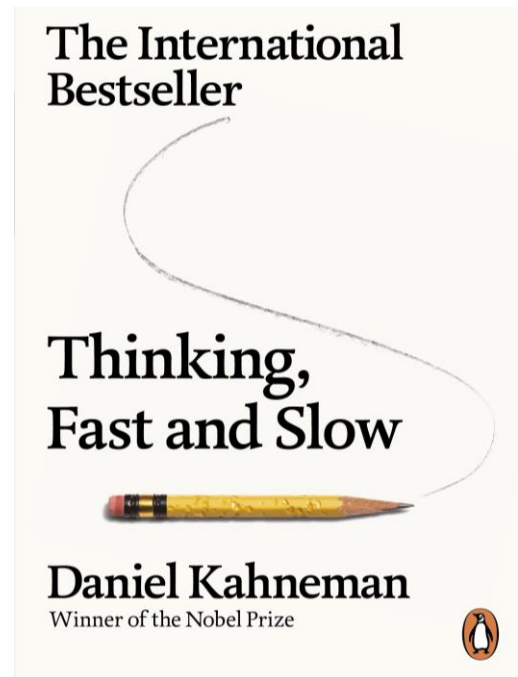
I found the chapters about *priming* the most interesting. In this he covers experiments that have been run to see how thought can affect deed and the reverse, how deed can affect thought.

One experiment was carried out on groups of people who were set a word-association game for some time. Several groups were in particular given word-association tasks and puzzles principally involved with ideas to do with old age – words such as forgetful, grey, wrinkle, etc. The groups were asked to walk down a long corridor to another room where more puzzles were being done. Actually the corridor was where the experimental measurements were taking place. It was found that the groups that had been made to consider old age for some time, in a puzzle activity, then walked significantly slower down the corridor than they had before. The other groups doing randomly themed puzzles had no change in pace. It seemed to be that thinking for a while about old age then primed the people in the experiment to physically act in a way that is in keeping with old age.

Amazingly, the reverse was found to be true as well. Experiments were carried out where some groups were made to walk more slowly down a corridor than they otherwise would do. The groups that had walked at a slower pace were then much more able to link together word-associations and solve puzzles where the theme was about old age. Their actions previously had primed their thinking to be more in-line with considering old age.

This is a surprising idea, but a powerful one. We can prime ourselves to think and act in certain ways by the way we act. Often I hear people say that happy people smile more, but now I wonder if it is the case that people who smile might be happier. Can we, perhaps, use this priming idea to our advantage?

There is an experiment which we can carry out ourselves, just using a pencil. If being amused makes you smile, then it suggests that smiling is likely to make you amused. Take a pencil and hold it between your teeth such that the point is to the left and the eraser is to the right. This is the beginning of a smile, or at least your face muscles are starting to work in the same way that a smile would do. We can then do the reverse by putting the pencil in our mouth such that the pointed end faces away, putting our mouth into an 'O' shape to hold the pencil. This is the beginning of a frown. Experiments have been carried out with this and groups of people who were starting the smile expression were thereafter shown to be more joyful and likely to be more amused than random groups. Similarly people who



had been starting the frown were significantly less likely. So it does indeed look like that people who smile more frequently are also the ones who are happier.

What this says to me is that we are in charge and that the way we conduct ourselves physically can take the lead into how we are and what our moods are like. Calm people tend to walk slowly, so if I am feeling busy then sometimes I will make a decision to walk more slowly to prime my thinking with a physical action – and I have found that it works. Similarly if I am cross, I try to remember to whistle, because cross people do not whistle. I challenge anyone to stay cross whilst they whistle the theme tune to 'Terry and June' for instance (if I may show my age).

Being organised, helps thinking in an organised way; being neat too. It is a powerful and liberating concept that we can be so much in charge of how we think and act by seemingly small steps.