

# Secrets of the Brain

Goethe once said “none are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.” This line is popularly invoked in political contexts. But, the quote is equally powerful in personal ones. Instead of the state, imagine it’s our minds that exert a powerful influence over our lives in myriad significant ways, of which we are totally unaware. This is the sort of revelation I felt myself having while reading Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow* over winter break.

A few weeks ago, we read (or maybe not) that the number of new students at Cornell reading for pleasure has declined. Well, let me tell you what you’ve been missing. The Goethe analogy might seem grandiose, but I’m not the only one making such comparisons. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, whose own book *The Black Swan* has been called one of the twelve most important books since World War II, calls Kahneman’s book a “landmark ... in social thought, in the same league as Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*.” A review in *The Economist* went so far as to state “as Copernicus removed the Earth from the centre of the universe and Darwin knocked humans off their biological perch, Mr. Kahneman has shown that we are not the paragons of reason we assume ourselves to be.”

What is so earth-shattering about the book and why should you read it? First, its penetrating insights come from an intellectual giant. Steven Pinker, professor of psychology at Harvard, describes Kahneman as “the most important psychologist alive today.” Second, Kahneman, who by the way is also a Nobel laureate, gives us a framework that is a broad but useful blueprint for understanding how the brain works. The crux of this framework lies in the dual process

theory. Kahneman says the mind can be divided into two systems — System 1 and System 2 — the first, “fast, intuitive and emotional,” the second, “slower, more deliberative and more logical.” Using that framework, Kahneman explains how the mind you thought you had complete conscious control over actually functions in ways that you probably would not have imagined or, in some cases, wanted. This is not to say that the mind is kludge of irrationality — in fact, Kahneman says he cringes when his work is summarized in this way. The brain, he remarks, “works well most of the time,” but is still prone to “systematic biases” and can, subtly and without asking permission, alter our behavior. For instance, arranging sets of words associated with old age, like “Florida,” “wrinkle” and “bald,” into sentences causes people to walk down a hallway significantly slower than those who arrange words unrelated to old age. Are you dumbfounded by these findings? I am. And I’ll tell you why.

First, a lot of these revelations are relatively recent news. But second, they are striking because we have been taught so little about our minds. Since elementary school, we have learned and relearned the various branches of the government, their functions, founding and importance. By comparison, think about how little we’ve been taught about the instrument that allows us to learn and understand all that information, the tool upon which we rely to make all our decisions and the machine which controls virtually every single action we take. Kahneman’s book helps narrow that huge gap in our knowledge.

The lessons from the book aren’t just scattered factoids. They are part of a larger picture and often have clear implications in our everyday lives. One such sec-

tion of the book is the last one, in which Kahneman deals with our assessments of our lives. He makes a sharp distinction between our “two selves”: the “experiencing self” and the “remembering self.” Our minds do not lead us to remember experiences as they actually occurred, causing us to make some peculiar choices about our well-being. For example, Kahneman

barely even skimmed the surface. It really should make us reconsider the decisions we make and how we make them. We often express sophisticated opinions about the effects of things like the Federal Reserve Bank’s quantitative easing policies or the role of religion in our public education system. But when we talk about our minds and their decisions — which cer-



**Sebastian Deri**

*Thought Crimes*

recounts a study in which he had participants dip their hands into cold water. One hand they dipped in cold water for 60 seconds. The other hand, they dipped in cold water for 90 seconds — consisting of 60 seconds in which the water was just cold as the water in the first instance, followed by an additional 30 seconds in which the water, while still cold, was made warmer by one degree Celsius. After having experienced both conditions, rather than put their hand in cold water for only 60 seconds, most participants chose to put their hand in water for 90 seconds, voluntarily subjecting themselves to more total pain. This happens because the remembering self tends to focus on peak and concluding experiences, while ignoring duration. The implications of such an insight are far reaching. For example, even if the first two-thirds of this article was excruciating, as long as the last third is just bad, you’ll probably be more likely to reread it than another article of two-thirds the length which is excruciating throughout.

This is consequential stuff and I’ve

certainly exert more influence on our lives than federal, state and local governments combined — we are reduced to drivelings idiots. *He didn’t think well. Wrong decision.* Well yes, but why? And how might we prevent it? If nothing else, let’s at least develop a lexicon to describe what went wrong. This is one of Kahneman’s goals. He writes, “I hope to enrich the vocabulary that people use when they talk about the judgments and choices of others, the company’s new policies, or a colleague’s investment decisions.”

Kahneman’s book can’t fix all our brains’ quirks, but even if it just gives us a vocabulary to describe them, then, in the grandiloquent words of Goethe, he has made us a little more free.

So read up, slaves.

*Sebastian Deri is a junior in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations. He may be reached at sderi@cornellsun.com. Thought Crimes appears alternate Mondays this semester.*

## Crosswalk Condundrum: The Perils of Driving on Campus

I think I get it. You’re a student at a prestigious, Ivy League university. You’re strong, attractive, and have scores of friends. In just a few years, your reflexes and reaction time will be at their peak. You’re independent and on the verge of being indestructible. In short, you’re

shield wipers leave each time they pass over the oily glass. In areas where lighting is limited, I’m often unable to pick out a human dressed in dark clothes. Do you ever wear dark jeans? I’ve noticed that many students do wear dark jeans and jackets. Did I mention that my glasses fog up when the humidity gets over 60 percent?

Please don’t get bent out of shape reading this. I really don’t suffer from all of these afflictions. The sad thing is however, that I happen to be acquainted with people who do. The point I’m trying to make should be taken seriously. One or more

of these problems does affect everyone, at one time or another, and these people do drive on campus. Don’t take for granted that because you have the right of way in a crosswalk, that every driver will see you in time to stop. And don’t think that because you’re in hurry, darting into the roadway between parked cars is a safe shortcut.

I need to be on campus frequently because I teach, and I often have lunch meetings at Banfi’s. You, obviously, need to be on campus a lot, too. I see you when I’m concentrating on finding a parking spot. We often meet at intersections where you, as a pedestrian, have the right of way. Because I’m on campus so often, I am aware of, and do notice the yellow diagonal signs trying to alert me that a pedestrian is crossing. But sometimes I get distracted even if I’m not texting. (And let’s admit it, not everyone is as sharp as you and me).

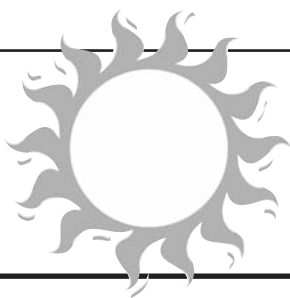
Often, you’re part of a long serpentine line of stu-

dents winding down to a crosswalk where I have stopped to let you cross. Instead of following your predecessor by four feet, it would be wonderful if you would pause, just long enough, for us motorists to make our way to the next crosswalk. Maybe you could politely wave us through? Some of you don’t even take the time to make your way to a crosswalk. When you attempt to cross where I don’t have the benefit of a warning yellow sign, you’re really taking a chance that you’re going to be the reason that you, or I, or perhaps my children or grandchildren, might spend the rest of our lives trying to navigate our way through life in a wheel chair. Is it really worth it?

By the way, do you realize how confusing — and frustrating — it is when you stand at the curb, talking on your cell phone? You often look like you’re poised to step into traffic but you’re actually engrossed in your vitally important call and oblivious to the traffic situation. What should we drivers do? Stop while you make up your mind, and hope all the drivers behind us to do the same? I fervently hope that when you step off the curb without warning I will be able to stop in time and that the drivers behind me have the requisite reflexes and eyesight.

When you get off the bus, maybe you could glance in both directions before running across the street? And please don’t let your headphones or your cell phone detract from your alertness. All it takes is a bit of awareness that you’re not the only living being on the planet — or even on the Cornell campus.

*Henry Stark is an Ithaca resident and member of the Cornell Class of 1959. He may be reached at at hbs6@cornell.edu. Guest Room appears periodically this semester.*



**Henry Stark '59**

*Guest Room*

just about in the prime of your life and relishing it. Me? Not so much.

Prime of life? I can’t even remember what that means. I wear hearing aids in each ear but I still don’t hear well, and the aids don’t shield me from distracting ambient noise. My reflexes are shot — by the time it registers that I need to hit my car brakes, I hope and pray that I can raise my foot off the accelerator in time. Sad to say, my arthritis isn’t getting any better. In fact, every time I turn my head to see if there’s a car in my “blind spot,” there’s a sharp twinge in my neck and I can’t turn past 30 degrees. Oh, did I mention my eyes? During my last appointment with my optometrist he told me that my cataracts are spreading. I have other vision problems, too. I don’t like driving at night because I can’t see well, but I do it anyway. The headlights from oncoming cars often blind me. Rain and snow are real distractions. I have great difficulty seeing past the smears my wind-