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Discipleship and Imagination

Abstract

"We are creatures ruled to a much greater degree by our desires and senses than we usually admit."

Posting about how discipleship can be cultivated from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/discipleship-and-imagination/>

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Discipleship and Imagination

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Donald Roth

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“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

– Romans 7:15 (ESV)

Have you ever found yourself strongly echoing the Apostle Paul’s conflict in this verse? I know I have. But have you ever thought about the implications of what it might mean that we could truly, really *want* something and yet do something totally different? The really convicting thing is that we know that no one is forcing us to do the things we don’t want to do. The ugly truth is that, on some level, we *wanted* to do the thing we tried not to do. The war is internal. The Apostle goes on to conclude that this experience is a result of a warring of the two men that live within him: the dead man of sin and the new man in Christ. The conclusion is natural: there must be more than one “me” in me.

Over the past few years, I’ve been exploring the implications of what begins when thinking about the phenomenon of self-control. As Donald MacIntosh has noted, “The idea of self-control is paradoxical unless it is assumed that the psyche contains more than one energy system, and that these energy systems have some degree of independence from each other.”¹ Nobel prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman even frames his model of our cognitive framework in terms of two selves (as we’ll see below). The two selves in this context are not synonymous with what the Apostle is talking about, but they’re aimed at similar phenomena. While Paul is addressing theological categories of sin and righteousness, Kahneman and others are addressing the cognitive processes that (when we put them in conversation with Paul) help to explain the mechanisms at play.

In today’s piece, I will describe how these two “selves” function from a cognitive perspective, including the crucial role our imaginations play in tying the two systems together. Then, in future pieces, I will describe some ways this can work out in how we think of discipleship and what we can do with the model as we fight our own Pauline struggles against our sinful nature.

We process the world through two systems

Although the theory didn’t wholly originate with him, Daniel Kahneman presents one of the most accessible modern accounts of the way that we process the world around us in his brilliant book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. In describing this, Kahneman employs a metaphor of two selves representing two systems that we use to process the world. System 1 is our intuitive, emotional core, and it “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control,” while System 2 “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it” and is “often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration.”²

These two systems are deeply interconnected, and they typically work together seamlessly. Kahneman describes System 1 as the “hero of the book” in that it is “effortlessly originating impressions and feelings that are the main sources of the explicit beliefs and deliberate choices of System 2.”³ This means we are creatures ruled to a much greater degree by our desires and senses than we usually admit.

However, System 2, acting as our conscious processing system, has a degree of veto power that allows it to step in, process complex problems, and exert voluntary control over certain decisions and actions. In other words, the phenomenon of “self-control” is something we experience when System 2 steps in to take over from System 1, and

the reason why this is so difficult is that the high octane problem-solving power of System 2 comes at a price. System 2 is taxing, not just in terms of an experience of effort and strain, but in raw physiological terms. Empirical study has shown that high cognitive load increases the brain's consumption of glucose and impairs our ability to exercise self-control in other areas of our lives.⁴

This model stands in some contrast with inclinations we often have to reduce this interaction into a simple hierarchy. We are not creatures ruled purely by our guts or desires, neither are we ruled by our heads and reason. Instead, we are kind of ruled by both, with the dominant partner (System 1) capable of being overridden and directed by the conscious specialist (System 2). But if we are composed of two systems that often operate in a quasi-independent parallel of one another, how do those systems speak to each other?

Our imagination links our cognitive systems together

If we're imagining two systems speaking to one another, then what language are the systems using? In his book *The Stuff of Thought*, Steven Pinker makes a convincing case that our conscious mind takes the sensory inputs from System 1 and plays with them much like my oldest daughter plays with Legos, mixing and matching them in new ways to construct something new. In other words, we take the sensory and emotional inputs of the world around us and use our imaginations to strip them down and repackage them into complex and abstract thought.

Pinker, along with other language philosophers like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, argue that metaphor and imagery aren't just things that we use when we're writing poetry; they are the pervasive elements that actually make up the way that we think. To borrow the title of Lakoff and Johnson's book, these are *Metaphors We Live By*. As an example, we think of an abstract concept like emotional intimacy by borrowing from our experience of physical proximity. That is, we say things like "we're close" or "they're drifting apart." We think of intimacy as a spatial construct, and motion through this imagined space can represent in our minds whether this intimacy is increasing or decreasing.

This is just a simple example to get us started, but it gives us a peek at the internal dialog between our systems. We take in emotions, intuitions, and impressions, often running off these things, but our specialist "self" processes these inputs, plays with them, and can both increase our understanding of the world and repackage these impressions to speak back to our intuitive self—not in spoken language, but in shared definitions drawn from the cobbled-together experiences that both systems understand.⁵

Here's the upshot in terms of our discipleship. We've all experienced the difficulty of maintaining self-control. Kahneman's work explains why we're fooling ourselves if we believe we can consistently *think* our way to righteous action. At the same time, habits are often hard to build and frustratingly fleeting, so we can't just follow the advice of people like James K.A. Smith and try to find good habits and healthy environments. Instead, we need to try to address *all* aspects of how we make decisions. We need right thought, right habituation, *and* we need to pay attention to our imagination—what definitions are we using, and what metaphors make that up? To tweak an example from Smith's *You Are What You Love*, we can think that we want to be more fit, and we can take up running, but that practice won't stick until we start to imagine ourselves as runners.

In multiple places, the Apostle Paul uses running a race as a metaphor for discipleship. What thoughts or impressions does this provide to the way we define the concept of discipleship? How might holding on to this definition cause certain practices to stick that otherwise wouldn't? In my next piece, we'll explore some of the metaphors that make up our definitions of discipleship, but until then, test the model I've presented here by unpacking this and other metaphors to see how they shape both what we think and do as disciples. I invite you to share your attempts and experiences below.

Footnotes

1. Donald MacIntosh, *The Foundations of Human Society* (University of Chicago, 1969) at 122. [↔](#)
2. Kahneman at 21. [↔](#)
3. Kahneman at 21-26. [↔](#)
4. This may explain why we're more likely to eat candy of the bowl in the office when we're stressed than when we're relaxed; we simply lack the mental energy to rein in the fleshly self when we're busy with other things. [↔](#)
5. In fact, psychologist Ray Jackendoff has produced evidence that suggests that our conscious experience is actually at an intermediate level between raw sensation and abstract thought. That is, System 2 is processing inputs from System 1, but it is storing that knowledge in System 1, which means it must be translating that information back into something that both systems can draw upon. [↔](#)