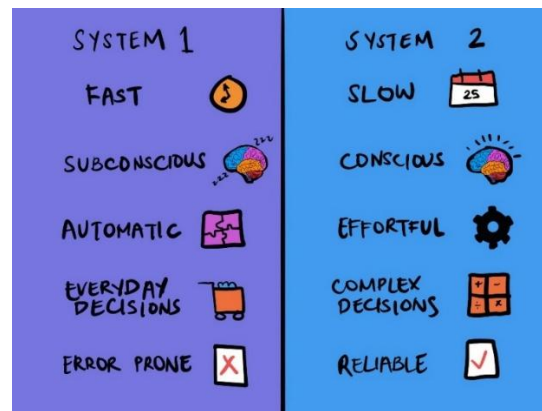


## Witness Moment Thinking and Implicit Bias



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In two recent Witness Moments we have seen the NFL assuming that black players are not as smart as white players and doctors assuming that the bodies of little black girls don't need medicine to heal. Learning this led me to this question: Why do so many people do such ugly things? Are there that many ugly people? So I set out to see what I could learn.

For me, the first step was learning where these racist beliefs come from, and I was very surprised to learn that the original settlers of South Carolina were from Barbados which had a vicious reputation because slaves there were routinely worked to death on the sugar plantations. Barbados had a "slave code" written to justify their barbarism, and the new settlers brought it with them. All of the ugly stereotypes, that African Americans are violent, that their bodies are different from white bodies, that they are less intelligent, stem from that slave code. All lies, but they told these lies over and over and over and over until they became part of our national culture, right alongside the Boston Tea Party and love of the flag. They now live in the subconscious brains of all Americans.

But this doesn't explain why so many people make decisions based on these lies.

To understand that I went to Daniel Kahneman. In his book, **Thinking, Fast and Slow**, he discusses the two types of thinking that take place in the brain. One type of thinking uses the memories and emotions stored in our subconscious brains to make quick decisions. It's what I need when I'm passing a parked car and it starts to back up. I need to **move**. Quick thinking depends on our subconscious to make life easier and safer. Unfortunately, it tends to make a lot of mistakes.

The second kind of thinking is slow. It is what I use when deciding to buy a car. I consider all the factors: size, mileage, cost, etc. Slow thinking analyzes and uses a variety of stored knowledge, so it is much more accurate, but it takes time and burns energy, so the brain is prewired by evolution to go with the quick decision. Once that quick decision is made, what the slow brain decides is ignored.

Kahneman uses the example of a man who loves animals and is deciding whether to invest in a certain company. The moment he looks at the name and sees “Pet Supplies” his quick brain says **GOOD COMPANY**. Now he will look over all the details, stock price, growth, etc. and he thinks he is analyzing the company, but his decision has already been made. Even if the financials are shaky he will invest, because his quick brain decided.

This reminded me of an incident in my own past. Back in the days when people went to malls for pleasure, I left Great Lakes Mall one evening, heading for my car. Suddenly I felt a sense of danger. My muscles tensed. I went on high alert and looked around. Where was the danger? Then I saw them, a group of male African American teenagers headed in my direction. I’ve taught teenagers for many years, and I could tell that these were good kids. They were neatly dressed and chatting among themselves as they headed into the mall, oblivious to my presence. But that was my slow brain, processing the facts. My quick brain made the initial decision and used those racist lies in my subconscious to make an ugly decision that I am embarrassed about and have never admitted until today. This kind of prejudicial decision making is called **implicit bias**, and it happens all the time.

The salesclerks who police Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson are ruled by implicit bias. The appraisers who value black-owned homes as less valuable than white-owned homes are ruled by implicit bias. The doctors who decided not to test those little black girls were ruled by implicit bias.

This is the answer to my question: Good people make ugly choices, because they are being ruled by implicit bias.

Implicit bias can be overcome. The NFL changed their testing after it was challenged. Dr Epee-Bounya used facts to change the medical algorithms, but it takes **awareness** and **effort**. Implicit bias is powerful, because **it uses our own subconscious minds to control our decisions without our being aware of what is happening.**

We are going to find implicit bias again and again, because **implicit bias is the tool used by structural racism.**

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