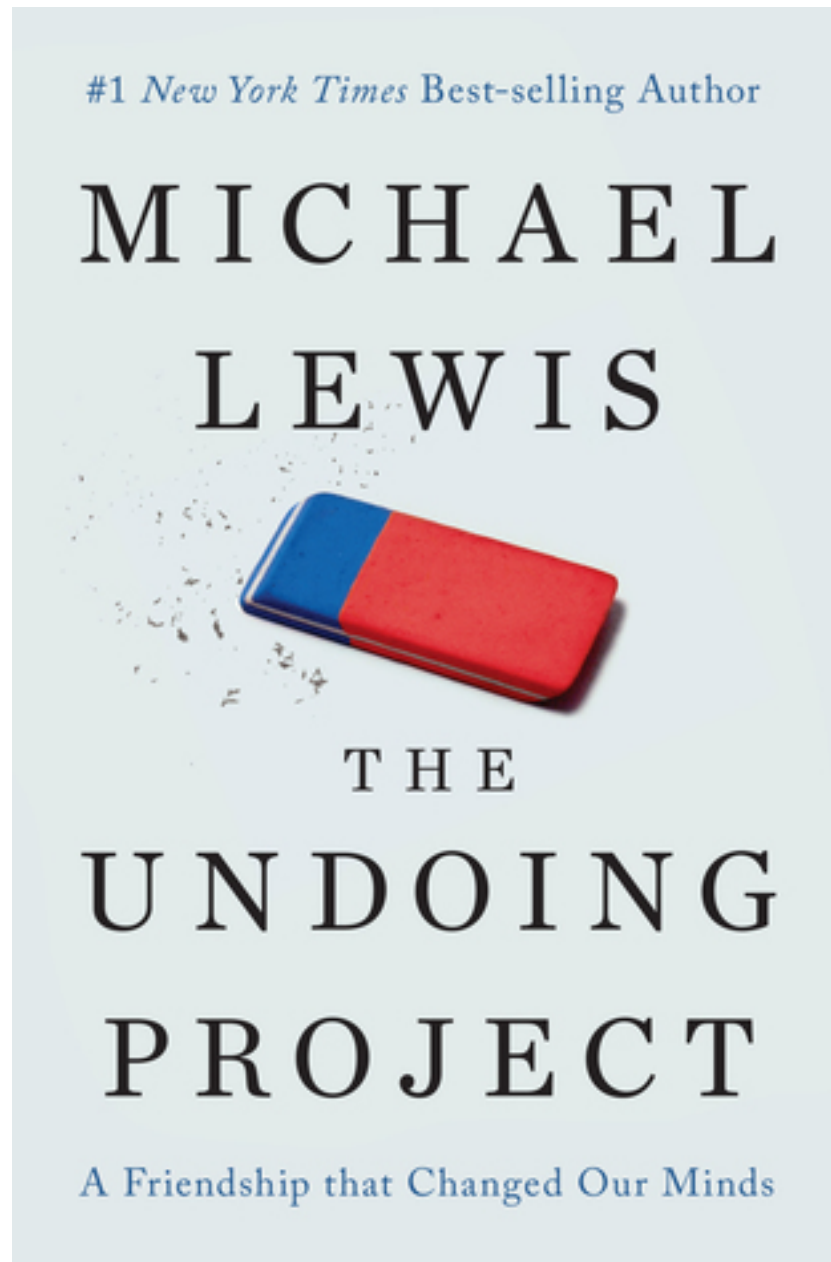


The Undoing Project: A Friendship That Changed Our Minds Book PDF Download



By:
Michael Lewis

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Trish

This nonfiction is unlike others Michael Lewis has offered us. In this he tries the trick of explaining confusion by demonstrating confusion, but near the end of this work we appreciate again Lewis's distinctive clarity and well-developed sense of irony as he addresses a very consequential collaboration in the history of ideas. Lewis did something else he'd not done before as well. By the end of this book I was bawling aloud, in total sync with what Lewis was trying to convey: why humans do what

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Daniel Kahneman is a psychologist who won the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics. What is remarkable about that statement is also what is remarkable about Lewis's attempt to explain it. Lewis made us feel the chaos and the unlikelihood of such a success, in this case, of ever finding that one person who complements another so perfectly that the two literally spur one another to greater accomplishment. From a vast array of possible choices, opportunities, and directions come two psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, who together add up to more than the sum of their parts.

One thing became clear about the groundbreaking work done by Kahneman and Tversky: despite the curiosity, drive, and iconoclastic talent each possessed, their moments of greatest crossover relevance came as a result of the involvement of the other. This could push the discussion into an examination of

, but Lewis resists that thread to follow what he calls a "love story" to the end, to the breakup of the two men. Once the closest of friends and collaborators, the reason for their breakup is at least as instructive as anything else Lewis could have chosen to focus on, and it makes a helluva story, full of poignancy.

Kahneman was an idea man, throwing up new psychological insights constantly, beginning with his early work recruiting and training Israeli soldiers for the front line. Tversky was a widely admired mathematical psychologist, iconoclast, and skeptic who challenged accepted thinking and in so doing, provided new ways to look at old problems. Just by asking questions he could lead others to find innovative solutions. Both Israelis were teaching at the University of Michigan in the 1960s but

their paths didn't overlap until later, back in Israel. In one of the classes he taught at Hebrew University Kahneman challenged guest lecturer Tversky's discussion on how people make decisions in conditions of uncertainty.

In this instance Kahneman became the iconoclast, the skeptic, pulling the rug from underneath Tversky. The challenge got under Tversky's skin, but instead of falling prey to anger, Tversky was galvanized. Colleagues who saw him at this time recall his unusually intense period of questioning. After a period of time, the men came together again and thus began one of the richest and most rewarding periods of intellectual collaboration in modern times.

Together, both men were able to isolate some important pieces in the thinking sequences of humans who were presumed to maximize utility in rational, logical decision trees. It took many years to isolate what struck them as incomplete or incorrect in the accepted thinking of others, but what they concluded revolutionized the thinking in several disciplines, including economics (and baseball).

Lewis's earlier book

discussed how an algorithm assigning different weights to individual characteristics of baseball draft picks could by-pass the errors human tend to make when looking over a list of potential players. This is related, in a distant way, to the illogic discovered in the decision trees Kahneman and Tversky discussed, and unfortunately Lewis decides to revisit the breakthrough in his own understanding at the beginning of this book. Describing that tangential result of the men's essential discovery unnecessarily complicates and obfuscates Lewis's central thrust in this book—the relationship between two men who supercharge their achievements when they are together. Once Lewis settles into the real subject of his book, his writing becomes familiarly crystalline, filled with science and emotion, describing a singularly fascinating tale.

David

This is a great story about two genius psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. They did groundbreaking research that led to improved understanding of how we make decisions. Although their personalities were total opposites, they found themselves enthralled with one another, and collaborated closely for fifteen years.

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Kahneman grew up in France just before and during World War II. His father helped his family narrowly escape from the grips of the Nazis over and over again. After the war, he moved to Israel, where he enrolled in the psychology department at Hebrew University. He found that there were no highly qualified professors, so he really taught himself. Then he joined the Israeli army, where his psychology training was put into use. He was ordered to figure out which candidates for officer training school were most likely to succeed. So, he designed strange tasks for the candidates to perform, and evaluated their test results.

Amos Tversky, on the other hand, was born in Israel. His personality was totally the opposite of Kahneman's; he was outgoing, popular, and always the optimist. He volunteered for paratrooper school, and became a platoon commander. He received a high award for bravery, by saving the life of a fellow soldier, at great risk of his own life. While handing Tversky the award, Moshe Dayan said to him,

During the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Tversky again was in the heart of the battle, and he did some brave, but very stupid things.

While both Kahneman and Tversky were academic research psychologists, they found themselves working on practical problems of real interest to their country. They were required to design tests and tasks that would help determine the future careers of young soldiers, and also help to make other difficult decisions for the country. Just after that war, Tversky gave soldiers questions about what motivated them during battles. It was not love of country; it was more obvious--soldiers fought for their friends and families.

At a certain point in their careers, the unlikely pair of psychologists got together and began collaborating. Their capabilities complemented one another. Kahneman was "the idea man", and Tversky was the genius mathematician. Neither of them could say, "this was my work", because it was always a true collaboration. They worked on decision theory, and the biases and prejudices that keep people from making optimal decisions. The book describes their experiments and results, and makes for some very interesting reading. They showed how people do not really understand probability; people are not very good at evaluating the odds of some event happening, or evaluating which of two events is more likely to happen.

The book relates how relatively simple algorithms can yield better, more reliable medical diagnoses than experienced doctors. This is also true in many other fields where "experts" think they have unique gifts for making decisions. The first chapter in the book discusses how this is even true for the case of recruiting basketball players into NBA teams.

Michael Lewis' book is fascinating throughout, and goes through the logic of many of the insights and discoveries that this pair of psychologists made. I did find it a little strange that no mention was

made of the fantastic, best-selling book by Daniel Kahneman,

Jan Rice

After reading about this book, I pre-ordered it, six months before its release date.

It's about the work of the psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who published
in 2011 and his late collaborator, Amos Tversky.

had a big impact on me.

Moreover,

's author is Michael Lewis, of

and

fame. That's about all I knew of him. Around the book's release date there was a flurry of publicity
interviews. I watched several, inc

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It's about the work of the psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who published

David Rush

I will be bold, and confidently tell you what this book is all about...Humans making decisions are
inherently handicapped by systematic biases that make them think they are being logical, but often,
or possibly usually, are not.

And Mankind longs for certainty but we live in an inherently uncertain world.

(Kindle Locations 2619-2620).

There, no need to read any more or my review.

BUT, I do ramble on, so here goes!

The two psychologists

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Christy

To start with the mundane and annoying: for a book with this much technical content, terms, and names an index almost seems a necessity, yet none was provided. More foot/endnotes and perhaps a fuller bibliography would be helpful, too. We must support the popularization of scholarly topics, and I've read that it takes, on average, at least 20 years for new ideas, analyses, and discoveries to move out of the academic curriculum of higher education to what we teach our children in secondary school

To start with the mundane and annoying: for a book with this much technical content, terms, and names an index almost seems a necessity, yet none was provided. More foot/endnotes and perhaps a fuller bibliography would be helpful, too. We must support the popularization of scholarly topics, and I've read that it takes, on average, at least 20 years for new ideas, analyses, and discoveries to move out of the academic curriculum of higher education to what we teach our children in secondary schools. I would have been less annoyed with the single reference to the importance of Gestalt theory here without Kurt Lewin, "utility theory" without Bentham's utilitarianism, etc. I have read the criticism that the theory isn't taught so much here, but Lewis is clear it's about the "friendship", after all, and the context of discovery as well as the influences in and around their mathematical psychology/behavioral economics but, still, how much time and money does it take? That Lewis's books are so plentiful, popular, and apparently all on cutting-edge issues, yet the books don't include full references has to be part of some problem. However, to his credit, he does mention the issue of the academic/popular divide in non-fiction writing on scholar topics in his endnote. I did enjoy Lewis's good writing, even if nothing is clearly explained except for about the two, their friendship and thinking, and the environs of that. Early on Lewis reminds us of the folly of our never-ending desire to have experts who know

things with "uncertainty". I don't need that in writing, and maybe I've graded too many papers, but I want a clear thesis. Lewis writes about a ton of interesting things, but I want to see some kind of argument through-line, even if it's to poke fun at an argument. One of the delightful facts, also hidden in his endnotes, is the coincidence by which Lewis got to know Tversky's family including access to his papers. Lewis was a teacher of one of Tversky's sons! He ended up meeting the mother while giving the child a recommendation.

I was studying Sociology of Science and researching probability theory in social science when I learned about Tversky and Kahneman's theory, and heard a talk by Gigerenzer (that I think Lewis dismisses unfairly, discussed below.) We know that decision-making in Behavioral Economics and applied market analyses were studied throughout the latter half of the 20th century with the same, central question: what does mind do when it's deciding on something, when we're uncertain about if and how to make a choice? Of course, our "emotional brain" emotes on it! Otherwise, we often cannot make decisions. I'd understood from Damasio

and LeDoux

that emotions must often be applied to our reason in order to make a decision, the former noting the example of the man that in an accident had his neocortex separated from the limbic system (emotional center) and he ceased ability to make decisions, merely calculating and considering one possible decision after another without emotions to force a choice. As Lewis shared, humans don't make decisions over a number, but need a "story". We can't remove the human mind from our decision-making processes, and we often experience "failure(s) of human intuition" like with the Thorndike's well-known "halo effect", when we make judgments of others based what we want to see, and don't often recognize what we aren't expecting to see. In the last decade or two, computer software and algorithms have improved data analysis and predictive strength, but we can't program a computer to remove surprises and the unexpected from our perceptions. That is a goal of the "undoing project". Data-driven decision making in sports isn't an interest of mine as I don't like sports (and even avoid sports metaphors), so the first part of this book was a bit painful to get through. Certainly, the read became to me much more interesting when it switched to Kahneman's life and early influences.

In their early work, Kahneman and Tversky contrast formal, scientific, statistical thinking with our everyday judgments of probabilities in real life situations. They claim everyone commits the fallacies, including our expert statisticians when they estimate probabilities in everyday situations. They grant that people are not "economic men (sic)": rational-logical, unbiased, with calculator brains. However, they think this divergence between everyday estimates and statistical, formal thinking to informal thinking is bad. They themselves are normatively defending the explicit, rational approach. I loved their criticism of statisticians' irrationality as I'd taken and somehow passed Advanced Statistics at the same time working on an independent study project critiquing the use of probability theory in social sciences. When I mentioned to my stats prof that only one of several versions of probability theory underlies all of statistics, he threw up a bit of the salad he was eating (true story). I was also concerned with the "growing prestige of math in the social sciences" (or what others

have called "physics envy" instead of social and behavioral sciences focusing on important questions. It didn't help that my doctorate statistician professor was what I called an "asocial sociologist" (how does that happen?) who casually mentioned that most all his best students appeared to be males over the years, with only two females in a class of a dozen or so, then gave me lower grades than my lazy male buddy who I helped work out some of the assignments. He also said that only students who can't do statistics well read Marx and Weber.

Thaler and Redelmeier were also two interesting people we meet in Lewis' story. Thaler argued that "it is the anticipation of regret that affects decisions, along with the anticipation of other consequences". We decide in ways not to "maximize utility" but to "minimize regret", since more utility (happiness, in Bentham's calculus) tops out but regret is the gift that keeps on giving (negatively). Redelmeier became Tversky and Kahneman's "pet schnauzer" protegee, and noticed that while medical school professors made errors in a systematic and traceable way they did not assume errors were in their data. I love that he became a doctor because he loved Hawkeye Pierce on MASH, and also the observation that since most diseased people get better, it's difficult for the doctor not to believe they had a definitive role on it. "In math you check your work, in medicine, no", in part as "to acknowledge uncertainty is to admit error", as Lewis summarizes. Stanford's head of cardiology advocated against motorcycle helmets, and Redelmeier was amazed at the stupidity that a medical doctor could do that, but I understand the "macho Western man" mentality. (The use of medical decisions here and in several other places in this book are poignant in the context of the news this week that a Harvard study claims that female physicians save 10s of thousands of patients more than male physicians "hummm?")

Towards the end, the economists were explained almost as the manifestation of their Neo-classical economic views of human nature. They were egotistical and wanted to prove their points, while psychologists were more introspective and wanted to sort out different positions. "Psychologists saw economists as immoral and economists saw psychologists as stupid." I'm not sure if this dichotomy is true or based in any real analysis of personality types besides anecdote. I've known economists that were the inquisitive, collaborative type and the psychologists were the cut-throat, competitive pedants, out to not learn the best perspective but to promote their own. In any case, Comte believed that psychological was not a science, or at least the introspective part of it, and it's interesting to compare this cross-disciplinarity with how Marx took up biological terms in his economic analysis, and now psychology as "decision science" uses the market terms of economics: utility, value, choice.

I was close to finished with the book last weekend when I read Leonhard's NYT review () that seemed to shift at the end between the descriptive claim of Kahneman and Tversky that people think fallaciously in everyday estimates and their normative claim that the rational, statistical approach is better and ought to be followed. Leonhard's clumsy analogy to Trump came after Lewis' better comment in the book, noting the failure of accurate assessment by journalism as few to none "shoe-leather reporters saw Trump coming". Leonhard's claiming Trump undermines Kahneman and Tversky's approach confuses what they describe as happening with

what the advocate as good to do. He seems to claim that the Trump victory shows that rational thinking is not successful in that Trump won. But this seems to be assuming that Trump's win is desirable (which Leonhard obviously doesn't believe). On the other hand, voters' behavior electing Trump does illustrate the irrational nature of everyday thinking that Kahneman and Tversky describe.