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The Last Decision by the World's Leading Thinker on Decisions

Shortly before Daniel Kahneman died last March, he emailed friends a message: He was choosing to end his own life in Switzerland. Some are still struggling with his choice.

By Jason Zweig [Follow](#)

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In mid-March 2024, Daniel Kahneman flew from New York to Paris with his partner, Barbara Tversky, to unite with his daughter and her family. They spent days walking around the city, going to museums and the ballet, and savoring soufflés and chocolate mousse. Around March 22, Kahneman, who had turned 90 that month, also started emailing a personal message to several dozen of the people he was closest to.

On March 26, Kahneman left his family and flew to Switzerland. His email explained why:

This is a goodbye letter I am sending friends to tell them that I am on my way to Switzerland, where my life will end on March 27.

Kahneman was [one of the world's most influential thinkers](#)—a psychologist at Princeton University, winner of the [Nobel Prize in economics](#) and author of the international blockbuster “Thinking, Fast and Slow,” first published in 2011. He had spent his long career studying the imperfections and inconsistencies of human decision-making. By most accounts—although not his own—Kahneman was still in reasonably good physical and mental health when he chose to die.

Kahneman was widely mourned nearly a year ago when his death was announced. Only close friends and family knew, though, that it transpired at an assisted-suicide facility in Switzerland. Some are still struggling to come to terms with his decision.

So am I. I knew Kahneman for almost three decades, and I spent two exhilarating and exasperating years helping him research, write and edit “[Thinking, Fast and Slow](#).” In 2008, we had a “book divorce,” as Danny felt he needed to go his own way to finish the book—and I joined The Wall Street Journal.

Our breakup was amicable, though; in the intervening years, I interviewed him [at onstage events](#) and regularly for my investing columns in the Journal. We periodically kept in touch by email and phone. I didn’t receive his final email, although several people have shared it with me over the past year.

For me, Danny’s death stirs up all kinds of feelings. When I was in college, my father took his own life with an overdose of sleeping pills. But my dad, whom I worshiped, was in excruciating pain; his lung cancer had metastasized to his bones, and after several surgeries, he refused to let the doctors keep carving him up with no hope of a cure.

My mom and my brother and I held his hands and told him we loved him. Sometime in our overnight vigil, I fell asleep, sitting upright, on his bed; when I woke up, my dad was gone.

But I never got to say goodbye to Danny and don’t fully understand why he felt he had to go. His death raises profound questions: How did the world’s leading authority on decision-making make the ultimate decision? How closely did he follow his own precepts on how to make good choices? How does his decision fit into [the growing debate](#) over [the downsides of extreme longevity](#)? How much control do we, and should we, have over our own death?



Daniel Kahneman in his Manhattan apartment in 2021. PHOTO: BENEDICT EVANS FOR WSJ

Before the groundbreaking research that Kahneman had conducted, much of it with Barbara Tversky's late husband, Amos Tversky, economists had long assumed that human beings are rational. By that, they meant that people's beliefs are internally consistent, they make decisions based on all the relevant information and their preferences don't change.

In a series of simple, brilliant experiments, Kahneman and Tversky refuted that definition of rationality. But Kahneman never contended that people are irrational. Instead he argued that they are inconsistent, emotional and easily fooled—most easily of all, by themselves. “Self-delusion helps sustain most people,” he told me years ago. In short, he made the case that people are neither rational nor irrational; [they are, simply, human](#).

Kahneman often said that decades of studying the human mind had taught him how to recognize—but not how to avoid—these pitfalls of decision-making.

I think Danny wanted, above all, to avoid a long decline, to go out on his terms, to own his own death. Maybe the principles of good decision-making that he had so long espoused—rely on data, don't trust most intuitions, view the evidence in the broadest possible perspective—had little to do with his decision.

His friends and family say that Kahneman's choice was purely personal; he didn't endorse assisted suicide for anyone else and never wished to be viewed as advocating it for others.

Some of Kahneman's friends think what he did was consistent with his own research. “Right to the end, he was a lot smarter than most of us,” says Philip Tetlock, a [psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania](#). “But I am no mind reader. My best guess is he felt he was falling apart, cognitively and physically. And he really wanted to enjoy life and expected life to become decreasingly enjoyable. I suspect he worked out a hedonic calculus of when the burdens of life would begin to outweigh the benefits—and he probably foresaw a very steep decline in his early 90s.”

Tetlock adds, “I have never seen a better-planned death than the one Danny designed.”

Kahneman's wife, Anne Treisman, had died of a stroke in 2018 after several years of suffering vascular dementia. Her illness was acutely painful to Kahneman; as he emailed me in July 2015, “I am very preoccupied by Anne's health and am not functioning altogether well.” He invited me to his memorial for her at their apartment in February 2018, although I wasn't able to attend. Years earlier, his mother had also died after cognitive decline.

In my files, I have the first draft of a chapter Kahneman sketched out in early 2008 for “Thinking, Fast and Slow.” He wrote: “During her last illness my mother lost her remembering self...she could not tell you much about her current stay in the hospital because she remembered so little of it. I discovered to my dismay that I knew much more about what she had gone through than she did.”



Kahneman, right, had a toast with his wife, Anne Treisman, at a reception in 2002 celebrating his Nobel Prize in economics. PHOTO: DON MURRAY/GETTY IMAGES

Kahneman didn't want that to happen to him. His final email went on to indicate that he felt that it soon would:

I have believed since I was a teenager that the miseries and indignities of the last years of life are superfluous, and I am acting on that belief.

Yet one of his most treasured principles was the importance of reconsidering. “Most people hate changing their minds,” he said, “but I like to change my mind. It means I’ve learned something.”

As I wrote [in a column about Kahneman](#) last year: “I once showed him a letter I’d gotten from a reader telling me—correctly but rudely—that I was wrong about something. ‘Do you have any

idea how lucky you are to have thousands of people who can tell you you're wrong?' Danny said."

Kahneman had told a few of those closest to him about his plans weeks before he flew to Switzerland. Despite their attempts to talk him into deferring the decision, he wouldn't budge. One friend pleaded with him so relentlessly that Kahneman finally told him to stop. Reluctantly, the friend abandoned the effort to get Kahneman to change his mind.

"I have no sunk costs," Kahneman loved to say. He always wanted the evidence, not the amount of prior effort or commitment, to determine his beliefs and actions. But, somehow, he couldn't let go of a view he had formed decades earlier.

Life was certainly precious to him. Kahneman and his Jewish family had spent much of his childhood hiding from the Nazis in southern France during the Holocaust. "We were hunted like rabbits," he said.

I am still active, enjoying many things in life (except the daily news) and will die a happy man. But my kidneys are on their last legs, the frequency of mental lapses is increasing, and I am ninety years old. It is time to go.

Kahneman had turned 90 on March 5, 2024. But he wasn't on dialysis, and those close to him saw no signs of significant cognitive decline or depression. He was working on several research papers the week he died.



Jason Zweig, left, interviewed Kahneman on stage at The Wall Street Journal CEO Council in 2016. PHOTO: PAUL MORSE FOR WSJ

As Barbara Tversky, who is an emerita professor of psychology at Stanford University, [wrote](#) in an online essay shortly after his death, their last days in Paris had been magical. They had “walked and walked and walked in idyllic weather...laughed and cried and dined with family and friends.” Kahneman “took his family to his childhood home in Neuilly-sur-Seine and his playground across the river in...the Bois de Boulogne,” she recalled. “He wrote in the mornings; afternoons and evenings were for us in Paris.”

One afternoon, according to her online essay, she asked what he would like to do. “I want to learn something,” he said.

Kahneman knew the psychological importance of happy endings. In repeated experiments, he had demonstrated what he called the [peak-end rule](#): Whether we remember an experience as pleasurable or painful doesn’t depend on how long it felt good or bad, but rather on the peak and ending intensity of those emotions.

“It was a matter of some consternation to Danny’s friends and family that he seemed to be enjoying life so much at the end,” says a friend. “‘Why stop now?’ we begged him. And though I still wish he had given us more time, it is the case that in following this carefully thought-out plan, Danny was able to create a happy ending to a 90-year life, in keeping with his peak-end rule. He could not have achieved this if he had let nature take its course.”

Did turning 90 play a role in his decision? Kahneman and Tversky’s [early research](#) showed that when people are uncertain, they will estimate numbers by “anchoring,” or seizing on any figure that happens to be handy, regardless of how relevant it is to the decision.

Another of Kahneman's principles was the importance of taking what he called [the outside view](#): Instead of regarding each decision as a special case, you should instead consider it as a member of a class of similar situations. Gather data on comparable examples from that reference class, then consider why your particular case might have better or worse prospects.

One possible approach: Kahneman could have gathered data to determine whether people who live to the age of 95 or beyond tend to regret not dying at the age of 90—adjusting for the difficulty of getting reliable reports from patients with dementia and other debilitating conditions. Perhaps he did something along those lines; I don't know.



Neuilly-sur-Seine in France, where Kahneman spent part of his childhood and revisited during his last days. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

He seems to have focused intently on another issue. As the next paragraph of Kahneman's final email said:

Not surprisingly, some of those who love me would have preferred for me to wait until it is obvious that my life is not worth extending. But I made my decision precisely because I wanted to avoid that state, so it had to appear premature. I am grateful to the few with whom I shared early, who all reluctantly came round to support me.

Kahneman's friend Annie Duke, a decision theorist and former professional poker player, published a book in 2022 titled "Quit: The Power of Knowing When to Walk Away." In it, she wrote, "Quitting on time will usually feel like quitting too early."

She is frustrated by his decision. “There’s a big difference between it feeling early and it actually being too early,” she says. “You’re not terminal, you’re fine. Why aren’t you taking the outside view? Why aren’t you listening to people who will give you good objective advice? Why are you doing this?”

Paul Slovic, a psychologist at the University of Oregon who befriended Kahneman more than 50 years ago, says, “Danny was the type of person who would think long and hard about things, so I figured he must have thought about it very slowly and deliberatively. Of course, those of us who spend our lives studying decisions, we think a lot about the reasons for those decisions. But often the reasons aren’t reasons. They’re feelings.”

Kahneman’s final email went on:

I am not embarrassed by my choice, but I am also not interested in making it a public statement. The family will avoid details about the cause of death to the extent possible, because no one wants it to be the focus of the obits. Please avoid talking about it for a few days.

Although assisted suicide remains illegal in most countries, it is [on the rise](#). Assisted dying is legal in Switzerland if the patient is of sound mind, at least 18 years old and the motives of those assisting aren’t selfish. The patient must self-administer the lethal dose.

It is an intensely emotional topic. A recent Gallup survey asked whether it should be legal for doctors to assist terminally ill patients in severe pain to commit suicide; 66% of Americans said yes. On the other hand, in a separate Gallup poll, 40% of participants said doctor-assisted suicide is “morally wrong.”

Aside from the potential for abuse, I think the reason for the ambivalence is obvious. If you end your life prematurely, before you are in acute pain or mental decline, you protect yourself and those you love from your imminent suffering. But you also expose your loved ones to the pain of your absence and the regret of never fully understanding your choice or why you didn’t listen to them.



Kahneman at his Manhattan apartment in 2021. PHOTO: BENEDICT EVANS FOR WSJ

As Danny's final email continued:

I discovered after making the decision that I am not afraid of not existing, and that I think of death as going to sleep and not waking up. The last period has truly not been hard, except for witnessing the pain I caused others. So if you were inclined to be sorry for me, don't be.

As death approaches, should we [make the best of whatever time we have left](#) with those we love the most? Or should we spare them, and ourselves, from as much as possible of our inevitable decline? Is our death ours alone to own?

Danny taught me the importance of saying "I don't know." And I don't know the answers to those questions. I do know the final words of his final email sound right, yet somehow feel wrong:

Thank you for helping make my life a good one.

Write to Jason Zweig at intelligentinvestor@wsj.com

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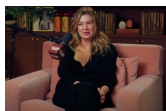
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