
Symposium

Is It A Bad Idea To Study Good Judgment?

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Wittgenstein warned in his *Philosophical Investigations* of the danger of saying too much: "Whereof one cannot know, thereof one should not speak." This pithy aphorism came to mind more than once in writing my own article and in assembling the other articles for this symposium. The problems in defining criteria for good political judgment are staggering. To label an act or opinion a manifestation of good judgment is to imply that one knows: (a) the true state of the political world; (b) the values that should guide decision-makers in coping with the world. Neither implication is usually justified. Can we say with confidence that, given the information available to him, Chamberlain was wrong to try to appease Hitler? Or that Churchill was right to oppose appeasement? Can we conclude that the Reagan defense build-up in the early 1980s facilitated, impeded, or had no effect on the emergence of "new thinking" in Soviet foreign policy? These questions raise controversy, in part, because their answers hinge on complex counterfactual reconstructions of history (cf. Tetlock, McGuire, & Mitchell, 1991). Who knows how events would have unfolded if Churchill had plotted British foreign policy in the late 1930s or if a liberal American president were in charge in the early 1980s? The questions also raise controversy because any political decision ultimately rests on more than educated guesses about counterfactuals. Political decisions require balancing conflicting goals. In this case, there is the risk of rendering oneself vulnerable to a predatory aggressor by appearing too weak, versus the risk of appearing too threatening and thus provoking a war that could have been avoided on mutually acceptable terms. What reason is there to believe that political psychologists have better insights into either counterfactual history or moral philosophy than anyone else?

This argument is a powerful one and, to be candid, it nearly persuaded me to abandon this project at its inception. The argument does, however, have a not-so-subtle flaw. It presumes that we can somehow prevent scholars from mak-

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ing inferences about good judgment. In my view, this is impossible and, if it were possible, it would be undesirable. The subject matter may be prohibitively complex, but it is also irresistibly important and deserves the most thoughtful analysis and research we can provide. (The alternative is to cede the topic to less-than-thoughtful analysis.) Many scholars are understandably drawn to normative conclusions. The following list illustrates the tendency of prominent researchers to make claims (right or wrong) about how policy-makers should think:

1. Jervis (1976) notes that policy-makers are creatures of bounded rationality who are often too quick to jump to conclusions from fragmentary evidence and too slow to revise conclusions in response to later disconfirming evidence;
2. Jervis (1976) also notes how the need for cognitive consistency can blind policy-makers to value trade-offs and both to the liabilities of policies they prefer and to the advantages of policies they oppose;
3. Neustadt and May (1986) characterize policy-makers as flawed intuitive historians who consider only a narrow range of possible analogies or precedents and then focus mostly on the similarities, not the differences, between preferred precedents and current situations (see also Vertzberger, 1990);
4. Janis (1982) argues that intense conformity pressures often build up in decision-making groups to the point where they bias the interpretation of evidence and restrict the options considered;
5. Stein (1990) maintains that policy-makers often give too much weight to the goals of deterrence and too little weight to reassurance in managing international conflicts (see also Downs, 1990).

In short, a value-free political psychology—in which scholars eschew all talk of good judgment—is not a practical option. It is not yet clear, however, which approaches to this multifaceted topic will prove most fruitful. Painting the subject with a broad brush results in at least three categories of approaches, with considerable variation of opinion within each category: the cognitive proceduralists who focus on the mental rules that people use to draw inferences from events and to choose among options; the advocates of domain-specific knowledge who focus on the accuracy of the assumptions and beliefs people hold about the political world; and, finally, the moralists who focus on the appropriateness of the values that drive policy. Each perspective is represented—with varying degrees of emphasis—in this symposium.

At a minimum, proceduralists emphasize the need to adhere to the basic principles or axioms of rationality. Good judges should not, for example, violate transitivity in their preference rankings. People who prefer option A over B, B over C, and C over A are ripe targets for shrewd negotiators. Good judges should also observe the dominance principle: whenever they are confronted by an option that is superior to the alternatives in at least one respect and equal on all others, they should choose that option. Notice that these procedural principles are con-

tent-neutral and say nothing about either the facts of the case (is option A really superior to B in some respect?) or about the values that should drive decision-makers (is this a good reason to prefer A over B?). The rules simply stipulate that, if decision-makers hold certain beliefs and values, they should make choices in certain constrained ways, and if they do not, a reasonable observer would call them inconsistent or even incoherent. The proceduralists make no claim for the validity or appropriateness of the decision-makers' beliefs and values. A paranoid schizophrenic—who is convinced that mushrooms are miniature flying saucers sent from another galaxy to spy on us—might well pass the minimal procedural tests of good judgment. The proceduralists also tend to be scrupulous observers of the fact-value distinction. Relying on minimal procedural criteria alone, one might not be able to exclude Jack the Ripper or Adolf Eichman as exemplars of good judgment.

It is fair to say that minimalist-procedural definition of good judgment defines a baseline that all of our contributors—Suedfeld, Kruglanski, Renshon, Etheredge, and myself—would probably accept. Good judgment cannot exist when judges harbor wildly inconsistent preferences. Beyond this baseline, however, our contributors diverge. Kruglanski, for example, proposes a more ambitious conception of good judgment which requires decision-makers to seek out the “most relevant, knowledgeable experts” who represent “different perspectives” on the problem (p. 24—cf. George, 1980, on multiple advocacy). This conception also calls for decision-makers who are “intellectually capable of integrating complex information” and “sufficiently motivationally balanced to consider it in an even-handed manner” (p. 25). Kruglanski's view of the “optimal judgment system” bears a marked resemblance to Popper's (1945) image of the scientific method: open to new ideas and tolerant of criticism.

Kruglanski's procedural prescriptions seem eminently reasonable, but he recognizes that, in response to circumstances (such as time pressure), decision-makers may have to rely on inferential shortcuts. Suedfeld amplifies this skeptical note. He depicts decision-makers as “cognitive managers” who, quite appropriately, often choose to violate formal procedural prescriptions to cope with ambiguous or contradictory information, or with the needs to act quickly and to appear decisive to both domestic and international audiences. Suedfeld emphasizes that simple heuristics frequently work as well or better than more complex information processing rules, that *post hoc* critiques that portray decision-makers as having fallen prey to cognitive biases are themselves biased, and that efforts to formalize elaborate procedural prescriptions for good judgment are doomed to fail.

In my own article, I draw a similar, although less far-reaching, conclusion. Good judgment requires the capacity to shift the content and style of one's reasoning in response to situational demands. Sometimes the best one can do is to use probability theory prudently and play the “base rates” (a position I identify

with the skeptics); sometimes the best thing is to think in self-critical and nuanced ways about the historical analogies and conditional generalizations that are guiding one's assessment of the problem (a position I identify with the complexifiers); and sometimes the best thing is to focus on the basic long-term causal forces that will ultimately prevail and to ignore the multitude of short-term distractions that dominate the headlines (a position I identify with the fundamentalists). Even so, the best one can do may often not be good enough—at least if one uses the accuracy of experts' forecasts as the standard for good judgment. The experts in my study did no better at anticipating key political developments (the liberalization of the Soviet Union and South Africa, the outcome of the Persian Gulf crisis) than if they had been assigned at random to the logically exhaustive set of forecasting positions.

Identifying procedural principles that define good judgment is no easy chore. Even so, the difficulties pale in comparison to those that arise when we try to work out conceptions of good judgment that go beyond specifying *how* decision-makers should think and presume to tell them *what* they should be thinking about. To take an example from my article, it is one thing to urge decision-makers to approach historical analogies with caution, to consider alternative analogies, and to note both similarities and differences between proposed analogies and the current situation. It is quite another matter to specify which specific analogies provide the most useful guides to sizing up the current problem and fashioning policies to deal with it. What historical analogies should come to mind in anticipating and responding to the regime in North Korea? the self-destructive fanaticism of Hitler in the bunker? the internecine maneuvering within the Soviet Politburo in the wake of Stalin's death? the brief but bloody civil war that overthrew Ceausescu? the sudden collapse of civil authority in the German Democratic Republic? the gradual and then rapid liberalization of Albania under the leadership of a Party insider? Can anyone, no matter how thoughtful or knowledgeable, predict which of these alternative futures will best capture Korean politics this decade?

Both Etheredge and Renshon directly address "content" issues in their approaches to good judgment. For instance, Etheredge questions the "self-advertised sophistication" of *Realpolitik* and Machiavellian assumptions about the workings of political systems and the best ways to cope with adversaries (p. 6). It may not always be wise to assume that others are ruthless power-maximizers ready to exploit the slightest sign of weakness or lack of resolve. Etheredge also identifies specific skills and sensitivities that serve political leaders well, including awareness of public moods, the ability to sense emergent possibilities, the capacity to convince others to view the world as one wants them to view it, and the patience to persevere in building political consensus around key components of one's program. These latter emphases in Etheredge's argument raise a fundamental challenge to those who view good judgment in politics as a special case of

applying the scientific method to another subject domain. Etheredge argues strongly that good judgment in politics is "*sui generis*"; it must be understood in its own terms. Good judges are not detached observers; they are active manipulators of public dramas who can discern in the chaotic rush of events ways of claiming valued social identities for themselves and imposing devalued identities on their adversaries. The scientist metaphor, in this view, is less apt than the actor or artist. Just as Michelangelo could look at a slab of marble and "see" a statue, so the shrewd politician can look at a purposeless polity and mobilize it around a new collective mission.

Renshon also explicitly argues for the inadequacy of purely procedural models of good judgment and for focusing on "those qualities of mind, temperament and character that ultimately underlie a leader's decisions" (p. 2). To craft a "fitting solution" to a policy problem is to "preserve and even advance the most important values and interests at risk," to impose "minimal harm" on others whose positions, "though legitimate, differ from one's own," and to inflict the "least possible harm on adversaries," consistent with the first two objectives. What kind of leader is up to the task of creating "fitting solutions?" There is no standard recipe, but good judgment in Renshon's view requires a subtle blend of character attributes, including self-confidence and a capacity for self-criticism as well as self-restraint and a capacity to act decisively.

Renshon then goes beyond these abstract specifications to apply his criteria for good judgment to the performance of both Saddam Hussein and George Bush prior to and during the Persian Gulf crisis. Saddam Hussein fails the tests for good judgment miserably; George Bush passes most, if not all, of the tests.

Once one operationalizes good judgment with content-of-thought requirements (and it is hard to imagine attributing good judgment to a political leader purely from knowledge of decision-making style, with no information whatsoever on policy priorities), it becomes extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to maintain any pretense of value-neutrality. Etheredge, for example, builds ethical constraints into his conception of good judgment, thereby excluding leaders who, by many material and historical indicators, were extraordinarily successful but utterly ruthless and unprincipled (such as Stalin). Renshon defines a fitting solution to a problem in a way that requires scholarly observers to make value-charged judgments. How does one determine whether another party's perspective "legitimately" differs from one's own or whether one has imposed the "least possible harm" on one's adversary? If General Schwartzkopf decided that the only way to save a small group of U.S. troops was to annihilate thousands of Iraqi soldiers, did he display good judgment? At this point, we leave political psychology and enter into the traditional domain of ethics. To whom are we morally accountable? And what are the ground rules? Should we adopt some form of utilitarian calculus? Or should we look to other ethical frameworks?

In sum, this symposium brings together a wide array of perspectives on

good judgment. There are some common themes running through the articles: a consensus, for example, that good judgment requires a self-reflective ability to think about thinking and to shift one's style of reasoning in response to situational demands. Good judges are not likely to be automatons. There are also points of divergence. Some contributors are more content with purely procedural prescriptions; others are more willing to build explicit ethical and moral considerations into their conceptions of good judgment. And there is one contributor—myself—who flirts with the audacious (perhaps fatally flawed) idea that good judgment should be identified with the ability to anticipate future developments in international politics. It would be unrealistic at this juncture to expect solid answers to the questions raised by this symposium; it must suffice, for now, to document the wide range of ways of asking questions about good judgment and then to observe which ways stimulate the most insightful research.

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