John J. Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato's *How States Think* offers a full-throated rejoinder to those who increasingly question the rationality assumption in international relations. It takes aim at the primary sources of that claim—the work of psychologically minded international relations scholars such as me—but also at rationalist scholars themselves.[1] By the standard of rationality they employ—guidance by theories that are subject to deliberative debate within a state apparatus—they conclude through a series case studies that rationality is the norm and not the exception.

As the person who has most pointedly made the opposite case, in my recent *Reasoning of State* (2019), it will come as no surprise that I do not agree. However, Mearsheimer and Rosato are scholars with whom I have previously engaged in a good intellectual scrum. I know from personal experience in discussing the draft of this very book that they prefer a robust exchange over a gauzy hagiography. In any case, I am an intellectual atheist. In the true deliberative spirit to which both authors and I subscribe, I will make my case and let the reader decide. They should really buy both books.

There are parts of the book with which I am in full agreement. The authors note how surprising it is that little literature exists on what rationality means, especially given the outsized role it plays in accounts of international politics. Rational choice theory disavows any interest in whether or not information is collected and how it is interpreted; it has no cognitive element. I am pleased to find that Mearsheimer and Rosato adopt the process-based conception that I have tried to promote. Rationality is not a question, they remind us, of outcomes. It is not synonymous with success. Rather, it concerns how policymakers and leaders make decisions. Rational choice is not good choice; it is good choosing. Herbert Simon called this procedural rationality.[2] Therefore we cannot do what “rationalists” do, which is to avoid...
cognition, psychology, and mental processes entirely. I therefore wholeheartedly concur with Mearsheimer and Rosato when they write, “Because thought processes are at the heart of rationality, this means that rational choice theorists ultimately say nothing about rational decision-making” (p. 11).

Here we part ways. I conceive of rationality as the combination of objectivity and deliberation. Decision-makers must strive to see the world as it is, which requires hard cognitive work given natural human dispositions toward bias. This bias can be unmotivated, due to cognitive constraints. This proposition was the foundation of the earliest literature applying cognitive psychology to international relations, and the primary focus of Mearsheimer and Rosato’s criticism. Much more important, and largely neglected within the book, is the role played by motivated bias. Human beings develop a stake, largely emotional, in seeing the world a particular way and are reluctant to give it up in the face of contrary evidence. This is true of everyone, even (perhaps especially) those from whom we expect more—experts, a category which includes professors. This becomes important later. Our views of the world provide comfort in an uncertain environment, and they often make us out to be better than we actually are—smarter, more righteous, et cetera. Leaders are hardly immune from these tendencies. Deliberation, in my definition, involves the active cognitive process necessary for making a choice when one has collected information as objectively as possible—the weighing of costs and benefits, the consideration of what responses our actions are likely to trigger in others, and so on.

In *How States Think*, Mearsheimer and Rosato describe rationality as a combination of theory and deliberation. They argue that decision-makers are rational if they employ a “credible” theory in their approach to making their choices. These theories help individuals “make sense of the world and decide the best way to achieve some goal” (p. 7). They are “simplified descriptions of reality that explain how some facet of the world works” and are “made up of empirical claims, assumptions and causal logics” (p. 38). They further note that these theories “simplify an enormously complicated reality by omitting certain factors that are judged to be less important for explaining a particular phenomenon while privileging other factors that are thought to be more important” (p. 44). Theories then enter a group decision-making process in which arguments are exchanged in a process designed to weed out bad ideas. “Deliberation is the hallmark of a rational aggregation process at the state level” (p. 8). Their conceptualization of deliberation is focused on group-oriented decision-making, a different focus than mine, but welcome.

My biggest complaint with this conception, which the authors anticipate (p. 93), is that the book describes theories as simplifying devices of the kind that lead decision-makers to depart from rational decision-making. Theory sounds analytical, deliberative, and therefore rational, but as applied by foreign policymakers (and even academics), it is often the very opposite. Theories bias our interpretation of incoming evidence. They are, as much as we would like to argue otherwise, inherently subjective. That is fine if they are simply used as a starting point, from which we gradually update in light of disconfirming evidence in a Bayesian fashion. But this is precisely why motivated bias is so important. Decision-makers are, in Mearsheimer and Rosato’s own words, “strongly wedded to their preferred theories and consider them superior to competing theories, whether credible or incredible” (p. 64, italics added). Rationality involves the recognition of this kind of bias and actively works against it. But that is not something that most people do.

Therefore, in essence, the authors relabel what is generally understood as nonrational processing on the part of political psychologists as rational. Political psychologists believe that rational
processing is difficult and rare and conclude therefore that it is not a good characterization of foreign policymaking. By appropriating what substitutes for rational decision-making as rational, the authors can claim that in fact rationality is the norm, but only through a highly dubious conceptual move. In other words, I believe the authors’ argument is entirely right empirically but entirely wrong theoretically.

Mearsheimer and Rosato argue that theories are not heuristics because the latter do not provide a view of the world and how it works. By a narrow definition of heuristic, as a simple rule of thumb, that might be true. But heuristics are part of a broader category of simplifying devices that include, most importantly, schemas, which perform that precise function. Susan Fiske, the legendary social psychologist, explains: “Schemas facilitate what is called top-down, conceptually driven, or theory-driven processes.... As people’s theories and concepts about the world, schemas are concerned with the general case, abstract generic knowledge that holds across many particular instances. The basic message of schema research has been that people simplify reality by storing knowledge at a molar, inclusive level, rather than squirreling away, one-by-one, all the original individual experiences in their raw forms, which would be pure data-driven processing.”[3] They are not simple decision rules but characterizations of one’s environment.

Schemas are familiar to international relations scholars through the work of Robert Jervis’s Perception and Misperception in International Politics (1976). The deterrence model is a conception of international politics that paints a picture of a dangerous world in which adversaries are looking for signs of weakness. The heuristic emerges: always stand firm in a crisis. The spiral model embraces a more benign conception of international politics that sees conflicts as arising tragically out of misperceptions about intentions and the security dilemma. These schemas are employed as general understandings of the world maintained even in the face of profound international changes. Shoon Murray’s Anchors Against Change: American Opinion Leaders’ Beliefs after the Cold War (2002) demonstrated empirically that the Cold War hawks, as the Soviet Union collapsed, simply transferred their fears onto new threats for whom no quarter could be given.

The claim, therefore, that “political psychologists say hardly anything about how individuals comprehend the world” (p. 71) is wrong, and has been for about fifty years. In fact, Jervis’s two models are much more common empirically than the theories that Mearsheimer and Rosato offer: realism and liberalism. Moreover, these theories rarely offer anything determinative in the way of foreign policy advice. On the other hand, we see deterrence models everywhere. On every issue, there are hawks who argue that we must stand firm in the face of aggression and doves who believe this to be self-defeating. Realists are typically strong critics of both sides, and generally ignored or pilloried.

The authors also take aim at rational choice theory, arguing that “expected utility maximization is not a rational approach to making foreign policy decisions” (p. 11). This argument ultimately depends on their characterization of international politics as profoundly uncertain, marked by the scarcity and ambiguity of information, what they call the “defining feature of international politics” (p. 19). Mearsheimer and Rosato embrace the conception of uncertainty that makes the probabilistic assessment of different choices of actions, what is better called “risk,” impossible. To pretend otherwise would be irrational. In such an environment, one has no choice but to rely on theories since inaction is not an option. They write, “To make decisions policymakers need some sense of probabilities.... Decision-making is impossible without such judgments. The best, though by no means perfect, way to estimate likelihoods in internation-
al politics is by employing credible theories” (p. 86).

_How States Think_ appropriates the ideas of psychology under the banner of rationality. Theories, by the authors’ definition (and entirely consistent with psychological approaches), offer a model of the world that purports the existence of patterns and generalizable tendencies that make decision-making possible, and tend to be called on in situations of great uncertainty. Indeed, I make exactly this psychological argument in _Trust in International Relations_ (2012). When asked to construct international institutions to deal with problems that cannot be foreseen, decision-makers rely on core assumptions about whether or not states can be trusted. Mearsheimer and Rosato call this rational; psychology refers to this as nonrational. How do we know the difference?

They key is that if an uncertain world is inherently complicated and complex, rarely do we find patterns at all. Indeed, the reason that decision-makers often fail is that they are looking for patterns that are not there. If the world is truly as fundamentally uncertain as the authors maintain, then using theory to guide policy is not only a bad idea, but it would also be irrational (or better said, nonrational). No case will be the same. This is why analogical reasoning so often goes wrong. Yet, in situations of great uncertainty, we tend to discount how profoundly unknowable the world is and substitute the certainty provided for in the form of theories for uncertainty. We know this empirically because profound uncertainty is rarely acknowledged by decision-makers themselves.

The authors argue that the use of theories is rational because it is the best option available in situations of great uncertainty (p. 39), a kind of lesser evil of decision-making. However, what is called for in situations of great uncertainty is not what Philip Tetlock’s _Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?_ (2005) calls the “hedgehog” approach advocated by Mearsheimer and Rosato but rather that of the “fox.” Hedgehogs are those guided by large, overarching theories that they apply to all cases. Empirically they do much worse in terms of predicting events (even when they are experts) and do not even admit it when they do. The best use of theory is as a tool kit from which to draw, which is how foxes make judgments. Hedgehogs only have a hammer, so they will assume that everything is a nail. Foxes have a broader inventory that allows them to use a screwdriver if necessary (and choose the right head).

The characterization of the world as highly uncertain is a very welcome one for a psychologically minded scholar like me. Yet it fits very uneasily with the ideas and arguments of scholars such as Mearsheimer and Rosato. Instead, they argue that decision-makers are largely rational. The anarchic system incentivizes them to be: “There is a simple explanation for why states routinely think and act rationally when making foreign policy. International politics is a dangerous business. States operate in a system where there is no high authority to protect them and where other states can and may want to do them harm” (p. 13). Yet in order for systems to encourage a particular type or substance of decision-makers, its dictates have to be clear. We have to know what the system wants. That cannot happen if the world is as complicated and complex as the authors now appear to believe. Mearsheimer and Rosato are structural realists, for whom this is supposed to be unproblematic. Indeed, they take aim in the book at the neo-classical realists who problematize this process.

While “credible theory” therefore cannot be a precondition for rationality, I take no issue with the necessity of deliberation for rational decision-making; it is part of my own conceptualization. Mearsheimer and Rosato rightly place a focus on group dynamics, which I neglect in my own book. However, the authors offer a normative benchmark for rational state action that, I argue, is more idealistic than realistic. “Discussion alone is not enough to yield a rational collective decision. Poli-
cymakers must exchange their views and compare their merits in a vigorous and unconstrained fashion.... They must be willing to listen to their colleagues and weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the options before them” (p. 65). This is the Habermasian and largely liberal understanding of rationality, which is generally taken as an ideal that can never be reached.[4]

Group decision-making raises the unavoidable question of domestic institutions. Yet, in good neorealist fashion, no mention is made here of that crucial intermediate variable that a good neoclassical realist would raise. The problem is that in both nondemocratic and democratic states, institutional features likely gum up this process substantially. The dialogical process the authors describe is most likely in a well-functioning democracy in which ideas are openly and robustly debated and bad ideas do not stand the test. However, democracies are also by their nature decentralized, and bad ideas find their way into policy through any number of access points. Indeed, this was the very criticism Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt offered of the “Israel lobby.”[5] Authoritarian governments, on the other hand, very often compartmentalize decision-making so that only the leader knows everything, in an effort to maintain domestic security and prevent threats to rule. However, they thereby deny themselves the advantages of bureaucratic expertise, and tend to make bad decisions as a result, with fatal consequences.[6] This can even happen in democracies.[7] Some of the best work in the field is now dealing with this question and it supports Mearsheimer and Rosato’s argument that deliberative, unitary action is best. It just does not happen that much.

Notes


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