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HOW STATES THINK':

THE RATIONALITY VS THE EMOTIONALITY OF FOREIGN POLICY

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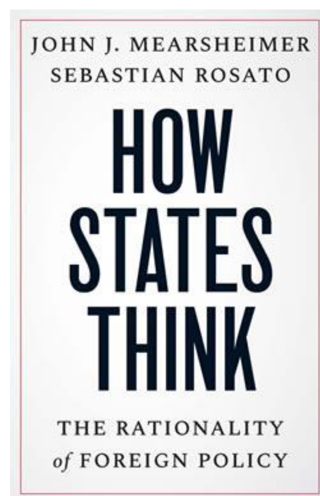

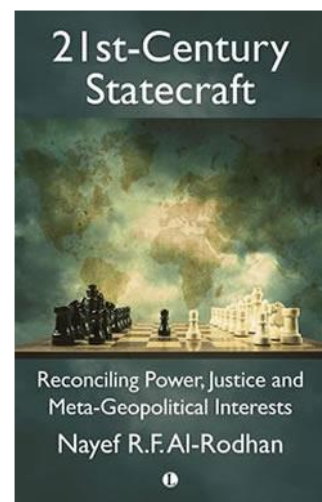

'How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy', a new book by John J. Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato, is a well-written and insightful examination of a central question in international relations: are states actually rational actors? That is, does the empirical record show that they are routinely rational or routinely non-rational? The issue is crucial for both the study and practice of international politics and the authors make the case that "only if states are rational can scholars and policymakers understand and predict their behavior". In this thought-provoking book co-authored over hundreds of Zoom meetings held predominantly during the Covid-pandemic, Mearsheimer and Rosato unpack how leaders think and how states jostle for expanded power and security. They do so by examining whether past and present world leaders have acted rationally in the context of momentous historical events, including both world wars, the Cold War, and the post–Cold War era, including the current Ukraine-Russia conflict.

At its core, the book argues that rational decisions in international politics rest on credible theories about how the world works and emerge from deliberative decision-making processes. Using these criteria, Rosato and Mearsheimer, a steadfast proponent of great-power politics, conclude that most states are rational most of the time. According to the authors, rational policymakers are "homo theoreticus": they have "credible theories" - logical explanations based on realistic assumptions and supported by substantial evidence - about the workings of the

international system, and they employ these to determine how best to navigate it. In short, they claim that “the historical record reveals that most states are rational most of the time”. They also stress that rationality is not about outcomes: one shouldn’t equate rationality with success and non-rationality with failure. With this in mind, the authors warn against the tendency to equate rationality with morality. They rightly argue that rational policies can on occasion violate widely accepted standards of conduct and “may even be murderously unjust”.

When it comes to the role of emotions in policy-making, the authors acknowledge that there are times when decision-makers are “driven mainly by emotions rather than theories”. They quote several respected experts, including the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, who argues that emotions are essential to rational thought. Damasio’s view is that emotions typically work hand-in-hand with reason. However, the conclusion that Mearsheimer and Rosato draw, that “these instances of emotions driving the train are rare”, is not necessarily the right one. In downplaying the role of emotions in decision making, the authors risk falling into the same trap as traditional international relations theoreticians who they claim to distance themselves from. The latter predominantly portrayed the state as a rational entity, which irrespective of contexts, could not afford to be led astray by emotionality in its international interactions. According to realist and neorealist accounts, seen through a prism of self-interest and power politics, a state’s conduct was guided by pragmatic and practical rationality.

In reality, inter-state dynamics are actually a lot more nuanced than this. The state can be a rational, self-interested, power-maximising actor, yet if we deconstruct the discourse on state rationality and state egoism, defined as the pursuit of national interests, we see a more complex picture of the facets of state conduct. To fully understand the balance between rationality and emotionality within interstate and transnational affairs, we need to get to grips with the key tenets of human nature. These have, of course, been much debated. Aristotle regarded humans as capable of living a ‘good’ life by employing reason while Plato argued that we are driven by both passion and reason: he famously compared balancing both faculties to steering horses running in opposite directions. David Hume was the first modern philosopher to argue that we make moral judgements based on emotional responses.

However, it is only in recent years that humanity has begun to discover the crucial role of emotions in rational decision-making, which is much more complex than the foundations that the Realist School had based its thinking on. New insights from neurobiology and behavioural studies have equipped us with a better understanding of the building blocks shaping human behaviour. In addition, advances in neuroscience and functional brain-imaging techniques have given us significant insights into the complex interplay of emotion and reason in moral judgement. Consider, for example, the work of Antonio Damasio, the neuroscientist quoted in Mearsheimer and Rosato’s book who I also referenced in my book ‘Emotional Amoral Egoism: A Neurophilosophy of Human Nature and Motivations’ published in 2021. I described the case of Dr. Damasio’s patient, Elliot, who underwent surgery to remove a tumour. The surgery impaired Elliot’s emotional capacity and whilst he still exhibited a high IQ, Elliot found himself incapable of making decisions, with negative consequences for his previously happy professional and family life. This is a reminder that emotions are central to the decision making of individuals. They exert a substantive influence on cognitive functions, such as perception and problem solving.

This more nuanced perspective does not directly contradict the realist perspective, but it does challenge the notion that emotions are of secondary importance in the decision making process of states. Drawing on extended research and my previous career as a neuroscientist, my

philosophy of "Emotional Amoral Egoism" helps shed light on how emotions can shape, and sometimes sabotage, certain political processes. This is not a pessimistic or negative view of human nature, but rather a more pragmatic approach supported by neuroscience as well as international, societal and interpersonal relations. It is also reinforced by the historical record of human behaviour throughout history and across different epochs, irrespective of geography or cultural frameworks. I argue that man is an emotional amoral egoist: our traits are partially determined by our environment, partially by survival-induced instincts, and are experienced on an emotional level. We are therefore not an entirely clean slate insofar as we possess predilections which are coded by genetics and later influenced by the environment. As humans are subject to varying external conditions, the propensity for rational or irrational behaviour is moulded by fluctuations in our environment, both personal and political. In a similar vein, the international system can also be characterised by a relentless tug-of-war between three human nature attributes (emotionality, amorality, egoism) and nine human dignity needs (reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation, inclusiveness). In an interdependent and highly connected world, individual and collective dignity deficits fuel contempt and turbulence. If these needs are met, our neurochemically-mediated emotions and motivations will promote social cohesion and cooperative non-conflictual behavior. If not, the opposite is likely to happen. Our emotional repertoire - which includes pain, grief, shame, ego, pride, contempt, anger, hate, reputation and greed - is often inflated to maximal levels when there are insufficient checks-and-balance systems in place to keep leaders restrained and in situations of fear, deprivation and alienation. As I wrote in 'On Power: Neurophilosophical Foundations and Policy Implications', power is addictive and manifests at a neurochemical level through a reward circuitry of dopamine flow in the mesolimbic subcortical parts of the brain. This is the same transmitter responsible for producing a sense of pleasure (i.e. sustainable and addictive neurochemical gratification). It is also likely that other neurotransmitters are involved in this reward mechanism, including serotonin, endorphins, endocannabinoids and testosterone. It is therefore not surprising that leaders in any hierarchical power structure, regardless of setting or system, will do whatever it takes to seek and maintain power.

More broadly, major turning points in world history cannot be understood without understanding their emotional motivators. After all, nationalism is, at its core, a story of emotions punctuated by symbols, myths and metaphors. These emotions are often fueled by revenge, applied history, skewed narratives of self or the other, or a subjective sense of historic (in)justice. For example, Adolf Hitler insisted on signing the 1940 armistice sealing the defeat of France in the Compiegne Forest, the same spot where Germany agreed to the armistice that confirmed its humiliating defeat in World War I. For added effect, Hitler ordered the armistice to be signed in the same railway wagon in which the previous armistice had been signed. These emotional motivators continue to shape our geopolitical landscape, although in seemingly less obvious ways. The international dimensions of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, which Mearsheimer and Rosato discuss in substantial detail, is a case in point. Other examples include highly charged memories of slavery, the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Spanish genocide of native South Americans, colonialism, the Opium Wars, two destructive world wars, the Arab-Persian/Arab-Ottoman divide, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Holocaust, Vietnam, tensions between India-Pakistan, Japan-Korea, China-Japan, North and South Korea as well as most recently the reheated Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Mearsheimer and Rosato end their book on a slightly downbeat note referring to the "hardly uplifting reality" of international relations. It is understandable why they might lean towards a more pessimistic view of the world. But there is, I believe, still space for cautious optimism, especially if humanity finds ways to mitigate against excessive emotionality and extractive egoism in international affairs. In an anarchic, yet deeply interconnected and interdependent world, we must break away from binary zero-sum paradigms and narrow, short-sighted geopolitical goals. Our best hope for a peaceful and prosperous world lies in pragmatic, win-win, non-conflictual competition and absolute gains rooted in Symbiotic Realism and Multi-Sum Security.

These account for the neurobiological substrates of human nature, as well as for the particularities of the world we live in: continued anarchy, with no just or representative overarching authority, an inept UN system, cascading frontier risks, instant connectivity and deepening interdependence. Only if humanity unshackles itself from deeply embedded cultural hierarchies and exploitative paradigms of hegemony, will we be on course to achieving sustainable peace, security and prosperity for all. 'How States Think' is a valuable addition to Mearsheimer's impressive canon, which is filled with intellectual gems such as 'The Tragedy of Great Power Politics' and 'The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities'. In this new book, Mearsheimer and Rosato are right to stress why we should not be too quick to dismiss policies we dislike as 'irrational.' But in the same breath, we would be wise to fully appreciate the central role of emotions and binary egoistic goals in decision-making and the intrinsic emotionality of states. Understanding the emotionality as well as the rationality of states will help us unleash the best in cooperative and peaceful human and state behavior.

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