Understanding Life and Life's Choices. A Tribute to Robert Jervis

James W. Davis, University of St. Gallen

> It is perfectly true, as the philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.
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> Søren Kirkegaard[1]

Robert Jervis and I first discussed the Danish theologian's oft-cited journal entry after an undergraduate lecture class for which I was the TA. Bob had used the citation to make a point during a discussion of the diplomacy surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall and what many referred to as the end of the Cold War, but he didn't remember its provenance. I took some satisfaction from the fact that I could remind him of the source. As we discussed the quotation while walking back to the Institute of War and Peace Studies—it was not yet the Saltzman Institute—I began to understand just how profound he regarded the statement to be. In subsequent years, I came to realize how profoundly his own research as well as his approach to scholarly practice and collegiality were influenced by the manifold implications of Kierkegaard's observation. And only weeks before he died, we returned to Kirkegaard in an email exchange on the article Bob had just finished for the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.[2] Commemorating his long overdue election to the National Academy of Sciences, the article would turn out to be his last.

In this brief tribute to my mentor and friend, I necessarily look backwards: at the scholarly legacy of a giant in the field of International Relations and the many doors he opened for me and others. Though modest, Bob was aware of his influence in the field. Yet I suspect he remained uncertain about his legacy, whether anyone would choose to walk through the doors he opened, and if so, where they might end up. For in understanding that life must be lived forwards, he was keenly aware of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and contingency such a predicament entails. Any effort to understand his scholarly legacy (and I suspect in many ways his private life) must recognize how he was not only guided, but also motivated, by this view of the human condition.

In what follows, I highlight how an appreciation for the ambiguity, uncertainty, and contingency of life can be seen in two themes running through Jervis's scholarship: knowing and judging. In doing so, I will revisit some of the questions I explored in my contribution to the Festschrift published in honor of his 70th birthday and then conclude with a few personal experiences that confirm the importance of contingency in my own ongoing journey. Though uncertain where I will end up, looking back, all roads lead to Bob.

On Knowing

How do we know that we know something? The straightforward answer, one often provided by Jervis himself, is: "It's complicated!" But though the answer to my question might be straightforward, it reveals little, and little that was of interest to Jervis was straightforward. Indeed, simply to ask an interesting question in IR is to enter a world of complexity.

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[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Journalen* JJ:167 (1843*), Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* Vol. 18 (Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, 1997), 306. Customary translation.

[2] Robert Jervis, "Why Postmortems Fail," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (forthcoming).

"Why did the Cold War stay cold?" Jervis posed this question to the undergraduates in that lecture only to deconstruct it. What do we mean by the term "war?" Sustained conflict involving organized forces producing a minimum of 1,000 battle-related fatalities? Probably not. In what sense and for whom was the cold war "cold?" Would our assessment of this period of international relations change if we were to refer to it as "the era of sustained superpower competition?" Calling it the Cold War inevitably led to the search for winners and losers, an exercise that in turn would corrupt our efforts to understand its origins. All this, while in other classes decrying the influence of deconstructivism in the social sciences!

Jervis recognized that making sense of the social world presents particular challenges. Not only because perceptions of our environment are mediated by preexisting concepts and beliefs, some of which will be idiosyncratic, but because we are usually trying to understand others with whom we are engaged in a strategic interaction and who simultaneously are trying to understand (and likely manipulate) us. Jervis regarded the challenge confronting scholars and decisionmakers to be similar. The central theme of *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*[3] is that decision-makers tend to assimilate ambiguous information to pre-existing belief structures, a process that often leads to misperceptions and flawed inferences. Armed with theory and knowing how the story ends, Jervis feared that scholars likewise are primed to see some things while overlooking others that might lead to rather different conclusions. Though uncomfortable with language smacking of post-modernism, he recognized that theory and data are interrelated in significant ways. Hence, rather than starting with outcomes and trying to fit developments to our concepts and models—that is, trying and understand outcomes backwards—it might be better to start with problems decisionmakers confront and then try to "see" the world through their own eyes. Of course, the task is difficult. Often, we lack the necessary data. But even when available, the data is suspect, for not only are decisionmakers often trying to deceive their adversaries, the wise amongst them understand their place in history and may be trying to deceive future scholars.[4] Jervis was particularly attuned to—and I believe ultimately impressed by—Henry Kissinger's efforts to influence future scholarship on his actions as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State through careful attention to the documentary record and a clever framing of controversial issues in his memoires, and he took obvious pleasure in pointing to examples where Kissinger was caught at his game.[5]

Because the task of knowing is so complex, no single tool is adequate to the task. The observation goes a long way in explaining why Jervis not only was open but also contributed to research from a variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives, with seminal contributions to the fields of political psychology, structural realism, nuclear strategy, arms control, deterrence, regime theory, diplomatic history, intelligence analysis, and complexity theory.

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[3] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[4] Jervis interest in deception led to his distinguishing "signals" from "indices," a distinction that would play a role in Michael Spence's Nobel Prize winning scholarship on costly signals. See, Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); and A. Michael Spence, "Signaling in Retrospect and the Informational Structure of Markets," *The American Economic Review* 92, 3 (2002): 434-459.

[5] A favorite example was Kissinger's early efforts to deflect and mitigate blame for excluding MIRVs from SALT I. Evidence that these were disingenuous to say the least is provided by Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1985), 141-150. For a brief overview of the issue, see Michael Krepon, "Retrospectives on MIRVing in the First Nuclear Age," *Arms Control Wonk* (blog), 5 April 2016, https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1201264/retrospectives-on-mirving-in-the-first-nuclear-age/.

For graduate students affiliated with Columbia University's Institute of War and Peace Studies, the example was at once inspiring and intimidating. Mastering the debates and methods of political science was daunting enough. But to study with Jervis meant engaging with a coterie of giants from cognate disciplines…*in person*. Imagine the exhilaration and sense of inadequacy that comes with extended and intense discussions of work-in-progress with the likes of McGeorge Bundy, Paul Schroeder, and Marc Trachtenberg![6] Not only was there the challenge of absorbing the substance of their historical arguments, but also the need to come to terms with the historical method and what often was a not-so-subtle critique of the discipline to which many of us had just committed ourselves. For those who chose to walk through this particular door, however, the clash of academic cultures resulted in more creative sparks than intellectual fatalities. Bob was delighted when I suggested that Trachtenberg join my dissertation defense committee,[7] welcomed Marc's influence on James McAllister's important study of the post-war German Question,[8] and took satisfaction in the substantive dialogue between political scientists and historians made possible by Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman's edited volume, *Bridges and Boundaries*.[9]

For those of us interested in political psychology the model was similar. An invitation to join Bob's Political Psychology Workshop was an invitation to engage with the scholarship of the likes of Alexander George, Lucian Pye, Ned Lebow, Janice Stein, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (far before the latter two were socially acceptable in political science or economics). Regulars included established scholars, such as Jack Snyder and Jack Levy but also fellow upstarts, including Barbara Farnham and Rose McDermott. The workshop also provided a forum to discuss ongoing projects of younger scholars. I especially remember the discussions we had of Jon Mercer's pathbreaking dissertation on reputation, a project that critiqued some of the central arguments made popular by Thomas Schelling, a scholar Bob revered.[10]

Again, Jervis was opening doors even if he couldn't be certain of the path any of us might take should we choose to pass through them. In my case, the journey led to an application of prospect theory to questions surrounding the use of rewards and assurances in deterrence,[11] which in turn had me corresponding with Alexander George, Daniel Kahneman, Ned Lebow and Janice Stein, the latter two becoming close friends and mentors. In a study of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime decision-making, Barbara examined the effects of the domestic political context on leaders' efforts to cope with value conflicts in foreign-policy

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[6] The eventual publications included McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988); Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 1999).

[7] I remember well the debate I had with Trachtenberg at my dissertation defense over my critique of Raymond Sontag's interpretation of the War-in-Sight Crisis, a critique I could engage in only because Trachtenberg had taught us the importance of examining for ourselves the primary documents on which historians were basing their claims. See James W. Davis, *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 81-93.

[8] James McAllister, *No Exit: American and the German Problem, 1943-1954* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[9] Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds.), *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

[10] Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[11] Davis, *Threats and Promises*

decision-making.[12] Meanwhile, Rose moved beyond prospect theory to engage with a wider range of research in psychology, genetics, and the emerging field of neuroscience, eventually becoming a trail blazer in the development of the experimental method in IR.[13]

The breadth of expertise reflected in the work of the generations of graduate students Jervis mentored is impressive enough. Truly remarkable was the innovative ways that Jervis could apply tools derived from the disparate disciplines, theories, and methods to deliver novel insights that often contradicted his previous commitments. Randall Schweller, himself an accomplished theorist, compared Jervis's virtuosity to that of a jazz musician: "You could see the wheels turning in his head as he set several thematic ideas into motion, partially expounding on one and then moving on to another with the promise to return to this or that idea later."[14] Trachtenberg's observation was similar: "[Jervis] looks at a problem in a certain light and he makes certain points about it. The points are often quite striking, but after making a certain argument, you can practically hear him saying to himself: 'Now wait a minute, isn't there another way of looking at it?' The perspective shifts, and soon everything appears in a rather different light."[15]

Some might conclude that such an approach to scholarship reflects a lack of theoretical commitment or some deep-rooted indecisiveness. Precisely the opposite was the case. Because Bob was convinced that the world we study is highly complex, and characterized by multiple connections among the various parts, he felt that unambiguous arguments based on isolating particular cause and effect relationships are likely to lead us to miss much of what is truly of interest.[16]

On Judging

Understanding life backwards implies beginning our analysis with the observable results of prior choices, a fact that tends to strongly influence if not determine our assignations of praise or blame. Jervis understood that the approach is often misleading. As realists have long argued, international outcomes do not necessarily follow from intentions, hence we cannot infer the latter from the former. A simple example from what may be Jervis's most cited work will suffice to underscore the point. Because of the security dilemma, even two peacefully inclined leaders can find themselves in war. And owing to system effects, competition among revisionist states might create a stable balance of power.[17]

Elsewhere, I have discussed at length how Jervis's approach to judging nevertheless fits into realism's preference for evaluating political decisionmakers on the basis of the consequences of their choices (*Verantwortungsethik*) rather than the values that motived them

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[12] Barbara Reardon Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis: A Study in Political Decision-Making* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[13] Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); and Rose McDermott, "Experimental Methodology in Political Science," *Political Analysis* 10, 4 (Autumn 2002): 325-342.

[14] Randall Schweller, "Jervis's Realism," in James W. Davis, ed., *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict: Perceptions of Insecurity in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 41.

[15] Trachtenberg, "Robert Jervis and the Nuclear Question," in Davis, ed., *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict*, 115-116.

[16] Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 73.

[17] Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, 2 (January 1978): 167-214; Jervis, "The Political Effects of Nuclear Weapons: A Comment," *International Security* 13, 2 (Fall 1998), 90; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1979).

(*Gesinnungsethik*).[18] At first glance, the affinity is not readily apparent. For in highlighting how cognitive limitations and the efforts of others to deceive routinely confound decisionmakers' abilities to accurately perceive their environment, and in stressing the difficulties of predicting the full range of effects caused by acting in complex systems, Jervis's scholarship would seem to absolve leaders of responsibility for the negative outcomes of their decisions. Perhaps we can dispense with classical Realism's view of political man as essentially evil and instead imagine a world of basically good, if fallible, people trying to cope with difficult situations?[19] Indeed, some have referred to his approach as the "no fault" school.[20]

Jervis recognized that his theoretical convictions complicated efforts to judge decisionmakers and decision-making. But as both a scholar and a consultant to the US government, he spent decades analyzing foreign policy decision-making to point out not only how things can go awry, but also how to cope with limitations on our ability to know and control the social world. We try to learn from the past so that we might do better in the future. His own approach is exemplified by his conduct of, and reflections on, post-mortem analyses of intelligence failures and the affinity to Kirkegaard is clear.[21]

Most important is the need to separate our judgements about the process of decision-making from our assessments of the quality of the decision itself as reflected in the results it produced. The task is complicated by the fact that post-mortem analyses are conducted at a distance:

> "The conditions under which people worked fade and become obscure even in their minds and can never be known by the reviewer. Such a person knows what the outcome of the events is, and he cannot fail to be influenced by that knowledge. Moreover, the material that he reads in order to determine what happened, what people knew, and what they wrote about it comes to him in a form much different from the way it comes to the intelligence analyst. The reviewer has the opportunity to read material through in a coherent order. For the analyst working on events as they happened, material or information must be absorbed as it comes in—sometimes in fragments, often not in a timely fashion."[22]

Yet empathy for the intelligence analyst does not imply absolution. As Jim Wirtz put it: "estimates written to meet the needs of the day have to withstand the test of time."[23] A focus on the process that led to conclusions alerts us to the fact that one can be right for the wrong reasons or wrong despite good process. But because we tend to focus our efforts on understanding "bad" results, we are likely to overlook the many positive outcomes that resulted from bad process. All too often we are selecting on the dependent variable.

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[18] Davis, "The (Good) Person and the (Bad) Situation: Recovering Innocence at the Expense of Responsibility?" in Davis, ed., *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict*, 199-219.

[19] For a statement of the classical Realist position, see Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil," *Ethics* 56, 1 (October 1945):1-18.

[20] Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 40-43.

[21] See Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

[22] Jervis and John P. Devlin, "Analysis of NFAC's Performance on Iran's Domestic Crisis, Mid-1977-November 1978," declassified as CIA-RDP86B00269R001100110003-4, as cited in James J. Wirtz, "The Art of the Intelligence Autopsy," in Davis (ed.), *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict*, 182.

[23] Wirtz, "The Art of the Intelligence Autopsy," 183.

For Jervis the remedy is better social science. The comparative method can help establish whether the putative errors in process are unique, or perhaps are common and thus also present in cases where things turned out better. Counterfactual analysis allows us to explore the possibility that the outcome might have been the same even if the decisionmaker had behaved differently. And thinking in terms of alternative explanations not only help us establish where inferential errors occurred, but also whether there was a less ambiguous match between the evidence available and alternative views that were expressed at the time. To argue that one should have done a better job of connecting the dots is banal. The problem confronting foreign policy decisionmakers is that there usually are many ways to do so, especially in complex systems where the relations among variables are multiple, non-linear, and often characterized by complex feedback loops.

In his post-mortem analysis of the US intelligence community's (IC) erroneous conclusion that Iraq's President Saddam Hussein had reconstituted his program to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD), empathy for the challenges confronting analysts combined with good social science method allowed Jervis both to refute popular claims that the IC had succumbed to political pressure and to locate important errors in process that led to flawed inferences.[24] Nonetheless, Jervis concluded that even a good process likely would have led to the assessment that Iraq had an active and broadly based WMD program. The conclusion provoked intense discussions among many of Bob's former students. Almost all of us had opposed the war and many feared that letting anyone off the hook would only provide grist for the mills of those whose theories of IR and policy preferences were so obviously at odds with Jervis's own.[25]

Such impulses were misguided. For if the IC was not guilty of telling politicians what they wanted to hear, Jervis's findings made it difficult for the political branches to absolve themselves of responsibility and scapegoat the IC for the decision to go to war and its consequences. Jervis recognized that the responsibility for the war lay with the Bush administration and an enabling Congress.[26] It was likely that they would have manipulated any assessment produced by the IC to fit conclusions reached on other grounds if only to avoid the necessity of acknowledging the value trade-offs implied by any significant foreign policy decision. Though he recognized the psychological impulse to be universal, Jervis nonetheless criticized failures to acknowledge value conflicts and what Max Weber termed the "incidental" costs involved in pursuing political objectives.[27] To quote Jervis's favorite IR theorist: "[T]he moral dilemmas with which statesmen and their critics are constantly faced revolve around the question of whether in a given instance the defense or satisfaction of interests other than survival justify the costs in other values."[28] Although he recognized the difficulty of predicting the ultimate effects of our actions, Jervis was true to an ethic of

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[24] Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 123-155.

[25] At the time one of the editors of the *EJIR*, I was thrilled when Jervis submitted a critique of the Bush Administration's Iraq policy. See Jervis, "The Confrontation between Iraq and the US: Implications for the Theory and Practice of Deterrence," *European Journal of International Relations* 9, 2 (June 2003): 315-337. See too, Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, 3 (Fall 2003): 365-388.

[26] But see Eliot Cohen's defense of the policymaker's predicament in his contribution to the roundtable review of *Why Intelligence Fails*. H-Diplo XI, 32 (9 July 2019), 6-8; https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XI-32.pdf

[27] Max Weber, "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy," in E.A. Shils and H.A. Finch (eds.), *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1949), 53.

[28] Arnold Wolfers, "Statesmanship and Moral Choice," *World Politics* 1:2 (January 1949), 189-190.

consequences in demanding that American decision makers confront their range of choice and weigh the intended benefits of their actions against the potential costs to other values:

> "The temptation to believe that the environment is so extreme as to compel the most awful actions and the statesmen's hubris of thinking that their acts are beyond judging are terribly strong and must be constantly resisted…. Perhaps as shocking as the calculated violations of moral standards are the many cases in which statesmen do not even think of what their acts will costs in terms of innocent lives, deplorable precedents, and values sullied."[29]

And yet, once a decision is made, Jervis recognized the virtues of confidence and perseverance for effective leadership. For if our confidence matched our knowledge, it would debilitate political action altogether.[30] Life must be led forwards.

On Collegiality

The political mind—more specifically, how political actors think (or sometimes don't)—was a major focus of Jervis's scholarship. Yet, I suspect he found very few decisionmakers whose thought processes he coveted even on those occasions when he did approve of their choices or recognized the virtue of their self-confidence. After all, decisionmakers, by definition, have to decide. And although he held strong beliefs, one of the most striking characteristics of Bob's approach to analysis was his reluctance cast final judgement. As Trachtenberg recognized, his intellectual virtue is found in a driving need to ask whether a given question, problem or puzzle could be viewed from yet another perspective, one that might lead to the identification of different causal processes and assessments of the effectiveness, reasonableness, or perhaps even wisdom of some decisionmaker's choice. Whether in the classroom, the political psychology research seminar, workshops with historians, or his famous lunch groups (which, owing to Covid, were conducted via Zoom during his last year of life), Bob was always probing others in search of novel perspectives.

Suspending final judgment meant eschewing theoretical and methodological trench warfare, mistrust of assertions of authority, openness to new ideas and people, and above all, humility with respect to his own claims to knowledge. These intellectual and personal virtues were fundamental to the collegiality that defined Bob and to the collegial environment he cultivated at Columbia University.

Looking back, I now understand how these virtues facilitated my own journey in the discipline. I came to know Bob Jervis in a chance encounter in the mid-1980s. I was an editorial intern at *Foreign Affairs* and had the opportunity to serve as rapporteur for a Council on Foreign Relations study group Michael Mandelbaum had convened on the Soviet approach to Arms Control. I was a nobody in a room of accomplished scholars and practitioners, but Bob nonetheless approached me during a break and asked about my plans for the future. I told him I was in the process of applying to graduate schools, having been encouraged to do so by Mandelbaum, but allowed that I probably didn't have the undergraduate record to get me into the best programs. In an illegible script he noted my name and told me to apply to Columbia. I followed his advice and have always suspected that something close to divine intervention played a role in my eventual admission.

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[29] Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 133-134.

[30] Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 162-165.

Looking forward, I realize Bob's intellect will forever be beyond my reach. Yet in tribute to his legacy and in recognition of the many debts I owe, I can recommit myself the many examples he set: as a responsible scholar, committed teacher, respectful colleague, and valued friend.

James W. Davis is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Institute of Political Science at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland.