

Expert Political Judgment

Philip E TETLOCK,

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'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt in your philosophy.' This was Hamlet's admission that he was confused by complexity and had difficulty in coming to judgments. Hamlet's eventual solution was inexpert, and created a new set of political problems.

Expert Political Judgment is an attempt to identify the characteristics of those individuals who have the ability to analyse situations in depth and with accurate foresight, so that their decisions are informed by expert political judgment. The author is a psychologist, but has worked for many years with a range of specialists in different disciplines to distil the quintessence of expert political judgment, not only for immediate needs but sustainable into the longer term. The main focus of the book is on forecasting outcomes of particular situations and on identifying which specific techniques and mental attitudes do so most successfully. Luck is recognised as a factor, but is set aside as exogenous. The quest is for the mindset and toolkit that will optimise forecasting by *'quantifying the unquantifiable'*. Mindset contrasts are drawn between 'radical sceptics', who expect nothing, and 'meliorists', who are open to seeking improved outcomes. Another facet of mindset is Isaiah Berlin's contrast between 'hedgehogs' who *'know one big thing'* and 'foxes' who *'know many little things'*. In the context of the book hedgehogs emerge as having fixed views, seeing issues as black or white and as supremely self-confident. By contrast foxes are open-minded, flexible and self-critical. One key finding is that while foxes emerge as winners of most of the tests, it is hedgehogs who are more focussed and willing to make tough decisions. In times of increasing uncertainty it would seem that fox-like characteristics are at a premium over those of hedgehogs in evaluation, but hedgehog confidence is needed to take action.

The book concludes with a challenge: *'Are we open-minded enough to acknowledge the limits of open-mindedness?'* This chapter is a critique of scenario planning which the author sees as advising only that *'anything is possible'*. Too often those involved are over-absorbed in inward looking details in building their stories, while an outside view is needed to provide a reality check. Tetlock fails to realise that

scenario planning should be used as a means of guiding action, not of engendering endless debate.

Judgment seems to involve a metacognitive trade off between theory- and imagination-driven modes of thinking. Theory offers certainty - imagination helps to cope with uncertainty. The author sees the best long-term predictor of good judgment to be a Socratic commitment by protagonists to thinking about how they think.

The book ends with an examination of objectivity and accountability. It seeks objective standards for assessing judgment, while recognising that subjectivity colours most judgments. It offers a whole range of tools to help achieve a self-correcting approach to judgment. It ends on a note of resignation: *'There are ineradicable pockets of subjectivity in political judgment. But progress is not as hopeless as opponents of social science never tire of insisting'*. Like the many hedgehogs Tetlock keeps quoting, he sees himself as *'almost correct'*, even though his quest has failed.

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