

Reason, Cause, and Cultural Arrogance

Written by Richard Ned Lebow

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RICHARD NED LEBOW, APR 11 2023

Debates about making international relations theory more international usually focus on analytical concepts. Most, like the balance of power, hegemony, polarity, class, identity, are Western in origin, and may or may not map effectively on to non-Western countries and regions. If they do, they may lead to a distorted analysis or one that privileges Western priorities. The same is true for paradigms. Marxism, realism, liberalism, constructivism, feminism, and arguably even post-colonialism, are Western in origin, reflect Western concerns, Western ways of thinking, and Western-conceived projects.

Western notions of epistemology have until now gotten a bye. They claim universality, based as they allegedly are on culture-free concepts of reason and cause. Neither concept is culture or value free, nor is any epistemology to which they give rise. Far from being universal, understandings of reason and cause are culturally based. In the West, they have undergone considerable transformations since their conceptualization in ancient Greece. They are not, of course, Western in origin, although are almost invariably treated this way by Western scholars who pay little to no attention to their long histories in China, South Asia and the Middle East.

Nineteenth and twentieth century understandings of reason and cause might be considered culturally racist and are mobilized to support claims of the superiority of Western culture. Western conceptions of the international are rooted in Western epistemologies, so the two subjects are closely related, if not co-constitutive. I focus on the concept of reason because it is so central to Western epistemologies and a yardstick frequently used to judge other cultures as backward or inferior. I argue that Western understandings of reason are doubly parochial. They fail to grasp, let alone attempt to come to terms with, the varied understandings of reason and rationality in Western culture. To the extent they occur, debates are narrow and parochial by being limited to contemporary social science texts, excluding past understandings and debates and the treatment of reason in history and literature. Not surprisingly, they also fail to look beyond the West.

I argue that problematizing reason, recognizing its social nature, exploring why and how it has been framed differently over time in the West and how it is understood and mobilized elsewhere in the world, which has the potential not only to produce better scholarship but to break down some of the cultural barriers and stereotypes that support the West versus the rest binary. This process also promises personal rewards by opening our ethical horizons. It can expand the circle of those we consider like ourselves and therefore subject to equal intellectual respect and treatment, thereby promoting dialogue.

Rationality has long been the basis for Western claims to superiority or progress over other cultures and regions of the world. Westerners point to the presumed rationality of Western culture and science, of which social science and IR are expressions. Max Weber (2011) famously attributed economic development – indeed, all forms of progress – to the application of reason to problems and secondarily to a related cultural trait that encourages hard work and deferred gratification.

In IR theory the fundamental cleavage is between so-called positivist and interpretivist methodologies. They cut across most paradigms and represent different understandings of knowledge, how it is pursued and how it is claimed (Lebow, 2021). Despite the profound differences between the two epistemologies they share a common commitment to reason. Adherents of both believe that logic, internal consistency, well-specified goals or propositions and

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procedures for gathering and evaluating evidence are central to their respective enterprises and distinguish scholarship from journalism and mere advocacy.

I do not doubt the value of rationality or its centrality to scholarship of all kinds. I do, however, distance myself from claims that the physical or social world are rationally structured or that rational models can usefully explain and predict human behavior. I question the deeply held belief that there is some objective thing called reason and another of cause, which is equally central to the scholarly enterprise. I contend that both are historically and culturally specific concepts. They have been formulated differently in the West from the time of the ancient Greeks through the Enlightenment to today. In my *Reason and Cause: Social Science and the Social World* (Lebow, 2020), I document the consecutive and significant reframing of reason and cause in fifth-century BCE ancient Athens, the Enlightenment, and the early twentieth century. These varied formulations reflect the changing needs and goals of those conducting inquiries and different understandings of writers, philosophers, and social scientists of their societies and their problems. Our interests, beliefs, experiences and expectations shape not only our view of the world but of the concepts we use to study it. Social science is inescapably social.

There is a long tradition going back to the ancient Greeks that treats reason as universal and objective. There are also writers and philosophers, again beginning with the Greeks, who regard it as deeply problematic and understand framings of it to be inherently subjective. Not surprisingly, the first tradition is the dominant one today as reason is the lynchpin of philosophy and social science. My sympathies lie with the second, and in the book noted above (Lebow, 2020) I do my best to document this tradition and foreground its claims. It reveals the social and labile nature of conceptions of reason and cause and identifies some of the conditions in which they are likely to evolve and reasons why they change as they do. I read not only social science but philosophy and literature as they also engage the concepts and utility of reason and cause – often in quite different, and even antagonistic, ways from each other and social science.

In modern social science reason is a vehicle for deduction and induction, definition and selection of evidence, and making inferences. Max Weber (2012) observed that all attempts at explanation, and any theories on which they are based must be rational, by which he meant logically consistent. This did not mean that people behaved rationally. He considered external rationality at best an ideal type that could be used as a template for understanding and assessing human action by determining how closely it approximated what rational people with the same goals would have done in the circumstances (Lebow 2017: 40–78.) This is a reasonable approach if one can get inside the heads of the actors under study and reconstruct their goals or preferences, the kinds of trade-offs they must consider, their risk-taking propensity and know what information was available to them. These requirements are so difficult to meet in practice that researchers routinely substitute their logics, calculations and information for those of actors they study. When this happens, reason loses any claim to being a neutral tool. It is also often a counterproductive one. Political leaders are often blind to the goals or calculations of other actors because they assume they think the same way they do. Political analysts and political scientists often do the same.

Weber suggests that reason even in the best of circumstances is never a neutral tool. We use it to assess our values and the ends we seek. Ancient Greeks considered reason a fundamental human drive that generates desires of its own. Plato believed that it had the potential to lead people to understand the nature of happiness and to constrain and educate appetite and spirit to collaborate with it toward this end (*Republic*, 430e6–1a2, 441d12–e2, Plato, *Symposium*, 209a–b). Aristotle thought it essential for the good life and also for *homonoia*, an undivided community (*koinonia*), whose members shared a consensus about the nature of the good life and how it might be achieved (*Politics*, 1106b35–7a4). Christianity followed the Greeks in making reason central to personal and political order. For Augustine, the city of god is a culture in which human beings use their reason to control, even overcome, their passions, and act in accord with the deity's design (*City of God*, 1950).

The Enlightenment constituted a sharp break with past thinking and practice. Its rejection of Aristotelian *telos* (the end something is intended to achieve, and how that end drives its development) helped pave the way for modernity. Rejection of *telos* required a corresponding reconceptualization of reason. It was reduced from an end in itself to a mere instrumentality – “the slave of the passions” in the words of David Hume (1998, Appendix I; 2000, 2.3.3.4). Max Weber would later coin the term “instrumental reason” to describe this transformation and explore some of its

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consequences. Freud incorporated it in his model of the mind; the ego embodies reason and mediates between the impulses of the Id and the external environment. Rational choice employs a similar understanding of reason; it assumes that actors rank-order their preferences and engage in the kind of strategic behavior best calculated to obtain them.

The modern conceptualization of reason as instrumentality is part and parcel of the shift in focus away from the ends we should seek to the means of best satisfying our appetites. This transformation constitutes a challenge to the assumption shared by so many philosophers and social scientists that reason and cause are objective and universal concepts. Karl Popper (1976), as committed as Weber to the belief that science was distinguished by its reliance on reason, noted this change. He acknowledged that reason is a human invention and understandings of it are, like “all things ... insecure and in a state of flux.”

A second shift concerns the degree to which reason should serve as the foundation for political orders. By the end of the nineteenth century Weber confidently asserted that reason had become the organizing principle of the modern world. The demystification of the world and the rising importance of scientific understandings of it brought about an increased emphasis on causal inference. It encouraged the belief that the physical and social worlds were organized causally and that all things could be mastered by calculation [*durch Berechnen beherrschen*] (Weber, 2012). This imparted a rational flavor to the everyday experience of even ordinary, uneducated people. This intellectualization encouraged people to act less on the basis of habit and more in response with conscious reflection and calculation and to calculate and assess the likely consequences of their behavior for the goals they sought. Weber (1968: 24) calls this *Zweckrationalität* (means-ends reasoning or instrumental rationality).

Major literary figures offered a more jaundiced view of reason and its consequences. Charles Dickens (2008), for one, had little faith in the power of reason. At every level of society his characters in *Bleak House* are moved more by their emotions and influenced by custom. They act in irrational ways when constrained by custom or in thrall to their emotions. They are just irrational – arguably more so – when liberated from custom and emotions and reliant on instrumental reason. Anthony Trollope (2000) shares Dickens’s view of reason. In *Phineas Redux* especially he offers parallel accounts of how judgments are made by society and the law courts. He challenges the conventional wisdom by showing that decisions and judgments in both domains are reached in ways that have little to do with reason and sharply at odds with the expectations of Enlightenment-inspired reformers and philosophers. Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins wants us to recognize that so-called facts can reveal the truth or stand in the way of its discovery. They only take on meaning in context, and these contexts are by no means self-evident. Lawyers and courts, he suggests, rarely go beyond Humean-style inference. They focus on resemblance and contiguity and routinely make unwarranted inferences on the basis of them. This process leads to the simplest explanations of events and responsibility. They are accordingly the ones most likely to be believed by ordinary people, who think the same way. Lawyers and juries act alike. So too do ordinary people; all three are deeply affected by elemental heuristics and biases.

Dickens, Trollope and Collins question the rationality of people and the utility of using reason to study cause. As often as not, their characters do not seek rational ends, do not behave rationally in pursuit of them, do not interrogate their motives and have only imperfect knowledge of them. All three authors suggest that rational strategies are not necessarily the most effective way of pursuing desired ends. In part this is because other people regard people who act this way as calculating and do not trust them. It is also attributable to the aggregation problem. People rarely act alone but do so in conjunction with others. Their interactions, as in *Bleak House*’s Jarndyce and Jarndyce lawsuit, can produce outcomes that none have anticipated or desire. Efforts to game them by instrumentally rational actors are bound to fail.

Victorian stereotypes portrayed the East as mysterious and irrational in contrast to the enlightened West, where most behavior was thought to be explicable and rational. Collins (1998) suggests the reverse is closer to the truth. In *The Moonstone*, many of the English are motivated by selfishness, insecurity and even extreme greed, that shows no respect for the life and property of others. Mr. Candy laces Franklin Blake’s drink with laudanum for his criticism of Western medicine. Colonel Herncastle obtained the diamond around which the plot revolves in India by murder and theft. Rachel Verinder and her suitor Franklin Blake are moved more by passion than by reason. Gabriel Betteredge

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looks for guidance to life's problems in *Robinson Crusoe*. This is another version of the ancient practice of soothsayers, who read fortunes from knuckle bones or entrails. The English people, Collins suggests, are emotional, irrational and superstitious, indeed, not far removed from their uncivilized ancestors. Godfrey Ablewhite – an incompetent ne'er do well – turns out to be a most ironic name. The Indians offer a sharp contrast. From their first appearance as jugglers – who are promptly dismissed as pathetic figures by the Europeans – they show themselves to be rational, calculating, steadfast, selfless, imaginative and plucky. They possess the characteristics the English unreasonably attribute to themselves. They succeed in retrieving the diamond and returning it to India to the temple to which it belongs. In doing so, they right a major wrong of imperialism.

As far as we know, Kafka did not write his novels with Weber in mind, but he produced a powerful critique of his approach to knowledge. Kafka follows Weber in believing that causal analysis depends on rational models and their fit with social reality. In *The Castle*, K. is a good rational analyst (Kafka, 1998). He starts with assumptions that appear reasonable (e.g., he has been summoned for a job and will be given the information and access he needs to complete it; officials are responsible and responsive, that he can infer the motives of townspeople on the basis of his general understanding of social life and human nature). These assumptions and observation form the basis for a series of inferences that are consistently wrong. We understand why he fails, and it has, ironically, to do with his commitment to rational analysis. Given the way the castle and the world work it stands in the way of understanding, let alone the attribution of cause. Cause is not a very helpful concept, and even costly to those who seek to apply it.

Kafka is convinced that cause in the modern world is so complex and so layered as to be largely inaccessible. Immediate causes that derive from human motives are often just as opaque. World War I appears to have strengthened Kafka in this belief. It was catastrophic, made no sense, and its causes, even the most immediate ones, were unknown or, at best, gave rise to dramatically divergent interpretations. The motives of the policymakers involved were difficult to fathom as were the diverse pressures acting on them, especially the deeper cultural ones. Rational inference leads to an aporia.

Diversity and controversy about what reason is, what purpose it should serve, and whether Westerners and their society are rational indicate that there is nothing objective or sacrosanct about any understanding of reason. It is not a meta-concept on which other concepts are based and evaluated but part and parcel of the social construction of reality. This recognition pulls the rug out from underneath Western claims of cultural superiority and framings of modernity, the 'best' and most 'rational' responses to it, and alleged commitment to reason as a distinguishing feature of Western culture. It opens space for dialogue with representatives of non-Western traditions about their understandings and uses of reason, and by extension, a mutual exploration of epistemology without any prior assumption of one understanding being superior to the other.

Recognition that reason is a social construction encourages a revolutionary reversal in the order of things. Instead of it being the foundation of inquiry, a meta-concept that precedes all others, it is one shaped by prior commitments and interests. To understand why we frame reason as we do, we need to examine these commitments, interests and perhaps, life experiences. Analysis always benefits from comparison. To understand ourselves, we need to understand others. Comparisons should begin with epistemologies or traditions in our own culture that frame reason, knowledge and the relationship differently than we do. We might focus on social science and philosophy but must also go beyond them to literature and other forms of expression because they too use or interrogate reason, and often quite differently – even in opposition to – social science. Understanding ourselves in the context of our cultural tradition is a first step. We need to understand our tradition by understanding others. What do we share in common? How do we differ? Are these differences of degree or kind? Can they be reconciled, overcome or made part of a larger, holistic understanding? Asking such questions requires a prior ethical and intellectual commitment to accept other understandings as equally worthy of serious consideration and those who propose or endorse them as ontological equals.

Such an enterprise is sharply at odds with the racial and cultural imperialism that has characterized social inquiry and IR for much of the modern era. It is not, however, at odds with the Western philosophical tradition. Plato's writings make the case that our understandings of justice, and the world more generally, are subjective and parochial. Recognition of this truth is the prerequisite of ethical behavior. We come to it by means of friendships that encourage

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empathy and allow us to see the world through the eyes of our friends.

Comparisons of our beliefs and frameworks with those of others can be a powerful source of ethical transformation. People who live with immigrants tend to be less hostile to diversity than those who do not. Rubbing shoulders and developing friendships is likely to create good-will and tolerance and overcome stereotypes. Becoming truly international requires open-minded engagement with non-Western 'others'. Friendships, empathy and dialogue are the appropriate pathways to this goal.

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About the author:

Richard Ned Lebow was born in France in 1941 and grew up in New York City and a Long Island suburb. He is Professor of International Political Theory in the War Studies Department of King's College London, Bye-Fellow of Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, and James O. Freedman Presidential Professor, Emeritus at Dartmouth College. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and recipient of honorary degrees in France, Greece, and the U.S. In an academic career now in its seventh decade he has authored or coauthored 40 books and over 400 scholarly articles and book chapters. He has made scholarly contributions to international relations, comparative politics, political theory, political psychology, history, classics, and philosophy of science.