

## Reason and Cause

Philosophy and social science assume that reason and cause are objective and universally applicable concepts. Through close readings of ancient and modern philosophy, history, and literature, Ned Lebow demonstrates that these concepts are actually specific to time and place. He traces their parallel evolution by focusing on classical Athens, the Enlightenment through Victorian England, and the early twentieth century. This important book shows how and why understandings of reason and cause have developed and evolved, in response to what kind of stimuli, and what this says about the relationship between social science and the social world in which it is conducted. Lebow argues that authors reflecting on their own social context use specific constructions of these categories to structure their central arguments about the human condition. This highly original study will make an immediate impact across a number of fields with its rigorous research and the development of an innovative historicized epistemology.

Richard Ned Lebow is author, coauthor, or editor of 40 books and more than 300 peer-reviewed articles and chapters. He has made contributions to international relations, political psychology, history, political theory, philosophy of science, and classics. He has taught at leading universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. His books have won multiple awards.

# Reason and Cause

*Social Science and the Social World*

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Richard Ned Lebow

*King's College London*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-47943-1 — Reason and Cause  
Richard Ned Lebow  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108479431](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108479431)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108785525

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First published 2020

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-108-47943-1 Hardback

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To Naomi and Jacob

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## Preface

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*Constructing Cause in International Relations*, published in 2014, made the case that cause is a creation of the human imagination, not a feature of the world. It is undeniably a useful concept for organizing social inquiry or making that research relevant to policy problems.<sup>1</sup> However, we can never demonstrate a causal relationship in the social world. The most we can do is make a plausible case for some causal link on the basis of a logic connecting antecedent to consequent that is consistent with the available evidence. We may rule out some causal claims on these grounds but can never validate them. On these epistemological foundations, I develop a novel approach I call “inefficient causation.” It recognizes that likelihood that possible “causes” exist at multiple levels of social interaction and at varying degrees of remove from outcomes of interest. It seeks to explore their relationships and trace multiple possible pathways to outcomes, and, by doing so, provide a framework for comparison across outcomes. It rejects prediction as an unrealistic goal because of the context-dependent nature of outcomes. Rather, it seeks to use the understandings of “causes” it develops as the basis for explanatory narratives and forecasts. They in turn must constantly be updated on the basis of new information from context.

*Constructing Cause in International Relations* raised as many questions in my mind as it answered. Chief among these is why so many philosophers and social scientists believe that cause is real, the glue that binds together the physical and social worlds, and discovered through the application of reason. David Hume challenged these assumptions in the late eighteenth century but with little effect. Most philosophers and social scientists also treat reason as universal and relatively unproblematic concepts. Here, too, David Hume is an exception. So is Max Weber, who distinguished between the reason he thought essential to any model of the world and different ideal types of reason that might be used to study human behavior.

Western conceptions of cause and reason are characterized by a tension that is rarely discussed. There is a long tradition going back to the ancient

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Greeks that treats them as universal and objective. There are also writers and philosophers, again beginning with the ancient Greeks, who regard cause as deeply problematic and conceptions of reason and cause as culturally and historically local. Not surprisingly, the first tradition is the dominant one today as reason and cause are lynchpins of social science. My sympathies lie with the second, and this book attempts in the first instance to document this tradition and foreground its principal claims. These pertain to the difficulty of establishing causes and the complex, and at times counterproductive, relationship between reason and cause. This tradition also 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. I draw on these literary and philosophical works to argue that these changes have identifiable patterns to them and are largely psychological and social responses to particular kinds of changes.

**Note**

1. Lebow, *Constructing Cause in International Relations*.

## Acknowledgments

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I am indebted to Carol Bohmer, Tony Grenville, Andrew Lawrence, David Lebow, Amy Lidster, Seán Molloy, Dorothy Noyes, Daniel Tompkins, and Christian Wendt. They served as foils to my musings, suggested books and articles to read, and provided feedback on draft chapters or the entire manuscript. Thanks, too, to John Haslam, copy editor Linsey Hague, and the production staff at Cambridge University Press. I also thank Dr. Álvaro Morcillo Laiz of the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) for the invitation to present a paper on Max Weber at a conference in honor of the centenary of Weber's seminal essay *Politik als Beruf* (The Vocation of Politics).