

Another method of reasoning uses *cause-effect analysis*—the claim that one phenomenon is caused by another. A debater might make the following argument: “Poverty is the most immediate cause for the spread of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Malnutrition weakens the body’s immune system, making it more susceptible to HIV/ AIDS. Poverty also forces breadwinners to travel long distances from home in an effort to find work; such itinerant lifestyles make it more likely that men will be unfaithful. Poverty also means that people in sub-Saharan Africa can’t afford the antiretroviral medications needed to control HIV/AIDS. Therefore, if we truly wish to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, we must address the problem of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa.”

There are five questions that should be asked about causal claims:

- Is the cause a necessary condition for the effect?
- Is the cause a sufficient condition for the effect?
- Did the cause precede the effect?
- Is there a logical explanation as to how the cause generated the effect?
- What other causes might explain the effect?

When asking whether a cause is a necessary condition for an effect, we are really asking whether the effect would exist without the alleged cause. Suppose I am a prosecutor presenting a case in court claiming that the negligence of a drunk driver caused an accident victim to die. In this case the death of the victim would not have happened but for the negligence of the drunk driver. Accordingly, this negligence was a necessary cause for the victim’s death. In the case of our HIV/AIDS example, we would be asking whether it is possible to have HIV/AIDS without being in poverty. Clearly, there are people who contract HIV/AIDS who are not living in poverty. Thus, living in poverty is not a necessary condition for contracting HIV/AIDS.

When asking whether a cause is a sufficient condition for an effect, we are really asking whether the cause is *by itself* enough to produce the effect. Consider our example of the drunk driver whose negligence killed an innocent victim. If I were the prosecuting attorney, I would be trying to argue that the driver’s negligence was a sufficient condition for the victim’s death. In other words, there were no other significant causes in play (such as the victim wandering aimlessly in the middle of the road when hit or a foggy morning that would have obscured the vision of even the most careful driver). The prosecuting attorney has the strongest causal case if it can be shown that the driver’s negligence was both a necessary and sufficient cause of the victim’s death. Consider, however, the claim that poverty causes HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Would it be true that living in poverty is a sufficient cause for contracting HIV/AIDS? Clearly not! Poverty might arguably be one of the factors increasing susceptibility to HIV/AIDS, but many people live in poverty while never contracting HIV/AIDS.