

Why is it important for the debater to know that poverty is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for contracting HIV/AIDS? This means that a program designed to reduce poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is unlikely to have a large impact on solving HIV/AIDS.

Another question to ask about causal claims is whether the alleged cause preceded the effect. Suppose a debater points out that the latest report of the U.S. Justice Department shows that major crime has declined over the past year. The debater claims that the passage through Congress last year of a tougher sentencing bill caused the decline in major crime. An opposing debater could simply point out that major crime has declined steadily over the past decade; it would make little sense to give the credit for this decline to a measure that has only recently been implemented. A causal claim has little validity if it can be shown that the effect was already underway before the alleged cause.

Causal claims must also offer some persuasive explanation as to how the cause generated the effect. It is never enough to show that a cause preceded the effect. One could say, for example, that “a bell in a church tower rang and two minutes later it began to rain; the bell must have caused the rain.” Such an argument is silly, of course, but many equally silly causal claims are made in the course of debates. A debater must be able to provide a reasonable explanation as to why the cause brought the effect into being.

ARGUMENT FROM SIGN

Another method of reasoning uses *sign*—the claim that one phenomenon is associated with another. We might say, for example, that a local restaurant must be a good place to eat because the parking lot there is always full. By making such a statement, we are accepting a full parking lot as a sign of business success. The full parking lot does not, of course, cause a restaurant to be successful; the restaurant could be sharing its parking lot with a used car lot next door.

Sign reasoning is very similar to a method of exploration that is now widely accepted in the social sciences—the computation of correlation coefficients. Suppose a communication scholar wants to explore how the amount of direct eye contact contributes to communication success. Any such study would have to account for numerous other intervening variables such as culture, gender, and socioeconomic status. At the end of the study, the researchers might find a high correlation between business success and the amount of eye contact for males in a Middle Eastern culture. This does not necessarily prove that by increasing your eye contact you can become more successful; it has simply found that one is a sign of the other.