

can evidence that proves a person was wrongfully convicted ever change the circumstances of conviction? Is it realistic to believe that a person can be convicted, later proven innocent, then actually released back to society? To answer that question requires evidence. In this case, examples and statistics probably provide the best source of evidence. Finding the relevant evidence would successfully prove the cause-and-effect argument: a reversible punishment can be changed. On the other hand, an irreversible punishment cannot. Again, in theory, such an argument is so obvious as to be trivial. However, defenders of capital punishment make the argument that such care is taken that the guilty are never executed.⁵ A debater supporting the proposition would need to find evidence to suggest that persons have been executed and later been found to be not guilty of the crimes for which they were convicted.⁶ The causal argument that must be made is that an effect of a reversible punishment is the ability to correct our mistakes. The punishment of life without parole enables society to at least partly correct errors, whereas capital punishment does not.

Now reconsider the second feature, the one common feature of both forms of punishment: both forms remove the criminal from society. The effect of this feature is that convicted criminals are not free to roam the streets. Using either capital punishment or life without parole, society is able to remove convicted criminals from the community. Although this feature is not useful as a point of conflict, it is a useful feature to demonstrate comparative effects.

Thus, we have illustrated effects of each of the three features. First, the effect of life without parole is to preserve life, whereas the effect of capital punishment is to destroy life. Second, the effect of both capital punishment and life without parole is to keep convicted murderers off the streets. Finally, one effect of life without parole is the correction of errors, whereas such an effect cannot occur with capital punishment. With respect to the second feature, these two objects of evaluation are not different. Having shown the effect of each of the three comparative features, we are now ready to move to the final part of the case for the proposition “Life in prison without parole is better than capital punishment.”

Evaluate the effect. Similar to the simple value proposition, the final step of the comparative value proposition is to evaluate the effect. As before, you can evaluate the effects by their consequences, by analogy, by principle, or by a variety of other warrants such as those discussed in Chapter 5. The general principle is that the debater needs to link the effect of the comparison to a value held by the audience. We will demonstrate using each of the three effects of capital punishment and life imprisonment.

First, you, as a debater supporting this proposition, are now in a position to say that life imprisonment without parole is better than capital punishment because it is more respectful of the principle of supporting life. You might be unwilling to go so far as to state that all instances of taking a life are immoral (self-defense; protection of family, community, or nation; etc). Nevertheless, you are on solid ground maintaining that persons should not take the lives of others unless such action is necessary for self-defense.

Second, you can argue that with respect to society, capital punishment is no better than life imprisonment without parole. A comparison of the effects of these two forms of punishment does not yield different results. Both kinds