Chapter 5 Observations in *A Rulebook for Arguments*

In chapter 5 of his book, Anthony Weston describes various cases of causation and correlation. Whenever an argument is raised, it is common that someone will use an example or a statistic to accurately prove their point. But it is important to be able to decide if it’s an effective illustration of whatever argument they are attempting to justify. Under heading 19, Weston claims that “any correlation may be explained in multiple ways.”[[1]](#footnote-2) He recognizes the fact that arguments using correlations are captivating, but many correlations are not automatically causations and there are many unique instances that are to easily noticeable. Weston first reasoning for his thesis is that “some correlations may simply be coincidental.”[[2]](#footnote-3) If two opposing rates both increase or decrease together, it does not mean they are automatically correlated. He then points out that “even when there really is a connection, correlation by itself does not establish the direction of the connection.”[[3]](#footnote-4) He uses wealth and attitude to demonstrate this concept. Does wealth increase attitude or does attitude increase wealth? Weston’s last reasoning behind his thesis is “multiple or complex causes may be at work, and they may move in many directions at the same time.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Just because two things seem to have the same rising or falling trends, it does not mean that they are the only two factors within the problem. There could very well be a third factor that explains the correlation. Weak evidence is given everyday, therefore it is helpful to know when and how to pick out fallacies within arguments.

Anthony Weston’s explanation of insufficient correlation is an accurate outline of the underlying issues within arguments. I agree with his thesis because there are many instances where arguments are weakly supported, although it can be difficult to directly decide where they fall short at first. In some cases, arguments based on facts are simply unconvincing because of all of the things that could go wrong within the specific correlation. Coincidence is not as coincidental as it may seem, and it happens more than one would think. Random, unrelated things could be correlated, but that does not always mean that one is generating the other. Even when there is an obvious correlation between two concepts, we cannot automatically assume the cause is one of the two. There is often times a third, unknown factor. For example, we might notice that children's’ moods increase during the warmer seasons. We would assume that higher temperatures equal happier children, but maybe a blood test would show that the children have significantly higher vitamin D levels in the summertime, caused by the sun. Vitamin D deficiencies have been linked to depression, therefore we would know the legitimate reason behind their mood boosts. The problem with most correlations is that there is often a concealed component to a “statistic” that would give understanding and meaning to the argument as a whole. It is important to understand how to distinguish fallacies from facts and correlation from causation when dealing with arguments.

Bibliography

Weston, Anthony. *A Rulebook for Arguments.* 4th ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2008.

1. Weston, Anthony. *A Rulebook for Arguments.* 4th ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)