

Some Logical Fallacies Dealt With In The Qur'ân

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A widely held belief about the Qur'ân is that it makes its basic appeal to emotions and not to reason. Among the advocates of this view were the Muslim philosophers of early centuries who used a theory of intellectual classes to support it. According to this theory, people have different levels of understanding: some are capable of grasping truth in its theoretical, abstract form (these are the philosophers, the most gifted intellectually), some are capable of rational thought but only within a closed system of belief (theologians make up this category), but most people have a humdrum intelligence that can comprehend truth only in its gross, material form (these are the masses, the great unwashed). Since scripture addresses the vast majority of mankind, the argument runs, it must cater to the needs of the largest of the three groups, that of the commoners, who can understand truth only when it is presented to them in material terms, for example through the use of similes and metaphors which pictorialize truth. It follows that, as a rule, one should not expect scripture to argue logically that is to say, with the aim of convincing the philosophers - but only to appeal to emotion, for that is the only way to persuade and sway the ordinary people. This view, however, reckons without the Qur'ân, for numerous verses of the Book make it explicit that it addresses human reason, that it faculty of reason. That is not all. The Qur'ân, as several modern Muslim scholars have endeavoured to show, offers sound logic and reasoning to support its fundamental teachings. The Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Abû Zakrah in his [I'jaz-ul-Qur'ân](#) (Egypt: Dâr-ul-Fikr al-'Arabî, [Introduction 1970], Part Two, pp. 364-388) discusses several aspects of Qur'ânic **jadāl** (argumentation). The Pakistani scholar Amîn Aḥsan Islâhî in his Urdu commentary of the Qur'ân, [Tadabbur-i-Qur'ân](#) (Lahore, 1967-1980) repeatedly draws attention to the Qur'ânic modes of reasoning. In the following paragraphs, we have attempted to isolate another aspect of Qur'ânic logic: fallaciousness of reasoning noted by the Qur'ân in the arguments of disbelievers, whether of Islamic or early times. Under headings familiar to students of logic, we shall cite, and briefly explain, a few instances of such fallaciousness. Needless to say, the following account is not exhaustive. The translation of the Qur'ânic verses cited is my own. A few prefatory remarks should be made. First, all the fallacies cited occur in the statements of disbelievers, typically in statements made by the opponents of the Prophets when the latter invite them to reflect on the message they had brought and believe in it because this was the right and rational thing to do. The Qur'ân thus underscores the fact that while the Prophets asked their

nations to think, ponder and exercise reason, the nations, unable to respond with sound arguments, argued fallaciously. Second, a number of fallacies can be identified quite easily, but some only after a close study of the verses or passages in question. The Qur'ân since it is not a textbook of logic, is not concerned to preserve the exact form of an argument. While reconstructing the form of a fallacy noted by the Qur'ân, for example, one has to keep in mind, on the one hand, such linguistic features of Classical Arabic as ellipsis, and, on the other, the Qur'ânic methods of presentation, like the method of citing a counter-example. Considerable effort may thus be needed in discovering the structure of a fallacy. Cases in point are the fallacies mentioned under [ignoratio elenchi](#) and [petitio principii](#). Finally, although I have not provided any example of it, I believe that sometimes several fallacies are stated together in a single Qur'ânic ayah (43:57-58, cited under [ignoratio elenchi](#), would seem to exemplify the fallacy of [argumentum ad populum](#) as well). A logician with a keen sense of the Qur'ânic language and method can expect to reap a rich harvest.

1. Argumentum Ad Baculum

The Latin word baculum means "stick." An argumentum ad baculum (or argumentum baculinam), therefore is one that appeals to the stick - or force. Force does not have to be used actually; the threat of its use would suffice to generate the fallacy. Several nations mentioned in the Qur'ân responded to their Prophets by issuing threats to them. For example, in Sûrah Hûd we find the people of Shu'aib saying:

"They said: 'Shu'aib, we do not understand much of what you say. We see that you are weak. Had it not been for your tribe, we would have stoned you, for you are not too difficult for us to handle'." [11:91]

In Sûrah Shu'arâ, Pharaoh threatens Moses with imprisonment if the latter were to take anyone other than him as a deity.^[1] Already (vs. 19) Pharaoh has given a veiled threat to Moses by alluding to the manslaughter Moses committed earlier: 'And you committed the act that you did commit'. Abraham is not only threatened, he is actually thrown into a fire:

"They said, 'Burn him up, and come to the aid of your deities, if you wish to do something'^[2] (21:68).

This happened only after Abraham had routed in debate the people in general (6:74-83), the king (2:258), and the custodians of the temple (21:51-71; 37:85-98). Noah is threatened by his people with stoning (26:116), Lot, by his people, with exile (26:167).

2. Argumentum Ad Hominem

The fallacy consists in an attempt to refute someone by making disparaging remarks about him rather than by responding to his argument. In other words, not the argument but the man (L. homo, "man") behind the argument is attacked. The nobles of the people of Noah rejected him and criticized his followers on the following grounds:

"We see that you are just a human being like us. We see that only those people have followed you who are quite obviously the lowliest among us. And we see that you are in no way superior to us. In fact, we suspect that you are liars."
(11:27)

In other words: Noah's message must be rejected because his followers happen to be such - and - such people (see also 26:11). 21:36 says that the Quraysh start making fun of Muḥammad the moment they catch sight of him, and pay no attention to his message. For other examples of this fallacy, see 23:47 (Pharaoh and courtiers/Moses and Aaron), 26:27 (Pharaoh/Moses), 26:153-154 (Thamud/Prophet Salih), 26:185 (Madyanites/Shu'ayb), 43:52 (Pharaoh/Moses).

3. Argumentum Ad Populum

In this fallacy one makes an appeal to the crowd, trying to play on their feelings. In the following verse, Pharaoh, unable to deny the miracles shown by Moses in his court, turns to his courtiers and tries to provoke them by suggesting that Moses intends to occupy their land and banish them from it:

"He said to the courtiers around him: 'This one here is a sophisticated magician. He intends to expel you from your land by means of his magic'..."
(26:34-35)

Another example, again involving Pharaoh and his noblemen on the one hand and Moses and Aaron on the other, is found in 20:63-64, where the common Egyptians are told that Moses and Aaron are magicians who intend to expel them from Egypt and, at the same time, destroy their superior culture, and that they, the Egyptians must do their best to counter their magic.

4. Argumentum Ad Verecundiam

This is an appeal to one's sense of modesty, so that the addressee would find it hard to make a response without being indecorous or indirect. In Sûrah Shu'arâ, Pharaoh, faced with Moses' demand to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt, says:

'Did we not bring you up when you were a child? And did you not stay with us for many years of your life?'^[31] (26:18).

Pharaoh thus tries to force Moses into a situation from which the latter would find it hard to escape without offending against such values as gratitude and reverence. Appeal to distinguished names is also subsumed under the *argumentum ad verecundiam*. Several nations, when reproached by their Prophets for idolatry, justified their conduct by appealing to prestigious names in their past history. Here, for example is the dialogue between Abraham and his people:

"When he said to his father and his people: `What are these images you are so attached to?' They said, `We have found our forefathers worshipping them'." (21:52-53)

5. *Petitio Principii*

In *Sûrah Zukhruf*, there is an example of the fallacy of "begging the question". Upon the mention of Jesus in the *Qur'ân*, the leaders of the *Quraish* tried to mislead their people by saying, first that the *Qur'ân* speaks of Jesus as a deity, and second, that the *Qur'ân* holds Jesus-as-deity to be superior to their own deities, the angels.^[4] Having made this statement, they asked their people as to who was better - the angels, whom they worshipped or Jesus? Now the conclusion drawn by the *Quraish*, namely, that the *Qur'ân* considered Jesus-as-deity superior to angels-as-deities was as baseless as the premise on which this statement was based, namely, that the *Qur'ân* spoke of Jesus as a deity. Here are the two relevant verses of the *Sûrah*:

"And no sooner is the son of Mary is cited as an example than your people start raising a hue and cry about him. They say: 'Are our deities better or he?' They say this to you only for polemics sake. The fact is that they are a contentious lot." (43:57-58)

The *Qur'ân* comments by saying (vss. 59 ff.) that the *Quraish* leaders know quite well that Jesus is not presented in the *Qur'ân* as a deity but as a human being who was sent to the Israelites as a Prophet.

6. *Ignoratio Elenchi*

This is the fallacy of irrelevant conclusion. If a person is asked to prove or disprove something and he proves or disproves something that is not at issue, he would be committing this fallacy. The following verse alludes to this fallacy:

"The case of Jesus in the eyes of God is like that of Adam: He created him from earth and then said to him, 'Be!' and he comes into existence."^[5] (3:59)

Christians regard Jesus as the son of God because, they argue, he was born without a father. To the *Qur'ân*, however, the conclusion is not warranted, for

otherwise Adam, who was born without any parent at all, would have a greater claim to deity.

References

[1] In Sûrah Yûsuf, where Potiphar's wife threatens Joseph with dire punishment if he were to refuse to comply with her wishes. '[And if he does not do what I would have him do, he shall be imprisoned, and he shall suffer humiliation.](#)' (12:32)

[2] If you wish to do something: The Arabic, in **kuntum faa`eelina**, is highly suggestive. It connotes emergency: Things are coming to a head, and it may be too late if you miss this opportunity to put a stop to Abraham's activity; so, if you are at all minded to do something, this is the time to act. It also is a plea for concerted action, for there is a hint that Abraham's opponents were divided as to the kind of action to be taken against him Cf. in **kuntum faa`eelina**, with similar connotations, in the story of Joseph (12:10).

[3] Although grammatically **Wa-labithta min `umurika sineena** is not a negative sentence, it is negative in respect of the overall structure of Pharaoh's statement, the first part of which is, **A-lam nurabbika walidan**. Two of the many examples of this construction in the Qur'ân are 93:6-8 and 94:1-4.

[4] This interpretation of the verses has been borrowed from Amîn Aḥsan Iṣlâhî, [Tadabbur-i-Qur'ân](#) (8 vols.; Lahore, 1967-80), 6:239-242.

[5] and he comes into existence: One expects to have "and he came into existence" (i.e., **fa-kana** instead of **fa-yakunu**). The change from the **madi** (past) to the **mudari** (present and future) indicates that the rule holds good for the present and the future as for past, that the creation of Adam was not the only occasion in the past when the command "Be" resulted in the creation of a human being, but that the creation of any other human being, or of anything for that matter, occurs in the same manner.