Islamic Critical Evaluation and Perspective on Fallacy of Argumentum ad Hominem

Mohammad Manzoor Malik[1]

Lecturer, Department of Philosophy and Religion, Graduate School of Human Sciences, Assumption University of Thailand

Email: philomalik@gmail.com, mmalik@au.edu

Abstract

Critical thinking is of very high importance in our information age. Knowledge of logical fallacies and their detection in discourses is one of the significant end results of it. Islamic and Western critical thinking have many common shared characteristics, yet there are some essential differences between them. These differences are because of the differing understanding and perception of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. This research paper explains the Western stand of critical thinking on Argumentum ad Hominem (Argument Directed at the Person) and then provides its critical evaluation from Islamic perspective. According to the Western critical thinking, knowledge cannot be rejected by attacking the personality of the person who claims it, doing so amounts to the fallacy of Argumentum ad Hominem. However, according to Islamic perspective as it has roots in the original sources of Islam and in its historical scholarly tradition there are some distinctions that are necessary to be made regarding the issue. In brief, knowledge in Islam could be divided into transmitted knowledge (al-ulum al-naqliyah) and rational knowledge (al-ulum al-aqliyah). The fallacy of Argumentum ad Hominem in Islamic tradition is irrelevant to transmitted knowledge (al-ulum al-naqliyah), when historical reports and narrations are rejected because of the unreliability and known vices of their reporter as being liars, untrustworthy, having a sectarian bias, dishonest, etc. The fallacy of Argumentum ad Hominem is relevant to rational knowledge.

Keywords: logical fallacies, Islam, critical thinking, Argumentum ad Hominem, al-ulum al-naqliyah, al-ulum al-aqliyah

I. Introduction

This research is aimed at providing an Islamic logical evaluation and perspective on Argumentum ad Hominem (Argument Directed at the Person) which is considered as informal logical fallacy of relevance in Western critical thinking. Knowledge of logical

fallacies is an essential component of critical thinking as a subject. In general, people are in need of having a good understanding of critical thinking, and avoiding logical fallacies is a crucial part of it. This type of research is of high scope because we live in the information age: people have access to various types of information and a wide range of information data sources. The contemporary time and anticipated future requires people to have critical aptitude to identify, understand, and evaluate the information; and on this basis, they should make right decisions, hold sound opinions, and become able to know the truth. In short, people should be good at critical thinking. Diane F. Halpern rightly says that "The rapidly accelerating pace of change that marks the opening of the 21st century has made the ability to think critically more important than at any other time in history" (Halpern, D. F, 2003, p.37) . Besides public, the overall education systems, schooling, and higher education should make critical thinking as an explicit and implicit component of the curriculum and syllabuses.

In the subsequent parts of this essay; firstly, arguments and their types and validity and soundness are explained. Secondly, the concept of logical fallacies is briefly described. Thirdly, a general Islamic perspective on informal logical fallacies is explicated. Fourthly, a detailed exposition of *Argumentum ad Hominem* is evaluated and analyzed. And finally, an Islamic perspective on the fallacy is discoursed.

II. Arguments and their Types

One of the major areas of critical thinking is to understand statements, claims, conversations, dialogues and opinions. All these types of forms of expressions are mostly arguments. An argument is a sequence of premises where all but one of the premises is intended to provide evidence, or support, for the conclusion or conclusions" (Roy T. Cook, p.15). Arguments are of two types: deductive and inductive arguments.

A deductive argument is "an argument where it is intended that it be impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false" (Roy T. Cook, p.81). Therefore, in a *deductive argument,* the premises provide a *guarantee* of the truth of the conclusion. In a deductive argument, the premises are intended to provide support for the conclusion that is so strong that, if the premises are true, it would be *impossible* for the conclusion to be false. An inductive argument is "an argument where it is intended that it be improbable (but possible) for the premises to be true and the conclusion false" (Roy T. Cook, p.150). An *inductive argument* is an argument in which it is thought that the premises provide reasons supporting the *probable* truth of the conclusion. In an inductive argument, the premises are intended only to be so strong that, if they are true, then it is *unlikely* that the conclusion is false.

III. Validity and Soundness of Arguments

Arguments are checked for their validity and soundness. The validity is a matter of form and deduction. An argument is valid if the conclusion follows from the premises, without any regard whether the premises and conclusion are true or false. All that matters is whither the conclusion follows from the premises. A valid form of argument can never lead you from true premises to a false conclusion.

Whereas, a sound argument is that which is valid and its premises are true. Sound arguments always have true conclusions. To put this in other terms, Harry J. Gensler has succinctly described it as follows:

Logicians distinguish valid arguments from sound arguments: An argument is valid if it would be contradictory to have the premises all true and conclusion false. An argument is sound if it is valid and has every premise true. Calling an argument "valid" says nothing about whether its premises are true. But calling it "sound" says that it is valid (the conclusion follows from the premises) and has true premises. (Harry J. Gensler, 2002, p.4)

A good argument is not just a valid and sound, but which is, besides being relevant to the issue that may be under discussion, free from many linguistic defects. Furthermore, it should "avoid circularity, ambiguity, and emotional language; and … be relevant to the issue at hand" (Harry J. Gensler, 2002, p.327). To detect problems in arguments, logicians turn to fallacies. Logicians use the term "fallacies" to identify typical or common errors in reasoning.

IV. Logical Fallacies

The word "fallacy" is error in reasoning; it may derive from the Latin word *fallere* meaning, "to deceive, to trip, to lead into error or to trick." The word may also derive from the Greek *phelos,* meaning deceitful" (Fallacies, 2014). Fallacies are classified into two types: formal and informal fallacies. Formal fallacies are about the form of an argument, whereas informal fallacies are about the content of an argument. Precisely, a formal fallacy is a flaw in an argument that depends on the logical form (Roy T. Cook, p.123) when the structure of an argument violates rules of deductive inference (James F. Voss, David N. Perkins, and Judith W. Segal, eds, p.299).

Whereas, an informal fallacy is a flaw in an argument and it is traceable to the meanings of the non-logical expressions contained in the argument (Roy T. Cook, p.153). Informal fallacies could be said are illegitimate moves in arguing steering discourse away from truth. And a rational being should avoid that in pursuit of truth (Susan T. Gardner, 2009

p. 76). The most common classification of informal fallacies includes fallacies of relevance, ambiguity, and presumption. And these three types are quite standard (Leclerc, Paul. 2014).

It is appropriate to say that the conception of both formal and informal fallacies in arguments as described in the Western texts on logic and critical thinking are debatable. Regarding the issue of informal logical fallacies, Western conception of informal logical fallacies is problematic because the conception of these fallacies is built in a special worldview which is materialistic. In result, critical thinking is reduced to the rules which are developed on materialism, and the approach which is used in critical thinking is therefore reductive. That is why those who do not subscribe to the materialistic worldview are sometimes accused of not being critical enough such as religious believers (Corriveaua , K. H., Chenb, E. E., & Harrisc, P. L, 2014).

Islamic critical thinking in principles and details becomes different from Western critical thinking in many ways. And Muslims should be critical within their own given parameters -- being critical within the confines of reason and revelation, not as an opposite approach in which reason may be taken as an opposite to revelation and vice versa, but as a complimentary approach. According to Islam, Allah created the first human being as the seminal beginning of the world population as it is today and Allah gave reason, senses, and revelation to the first man to guide him. Therefore, according to Islam all these faculties should be respected and their proper use will help people leading and living a well guided good life.

V. Informal Logical Fallacies and Islamic Perspective

Why there is a need of having an Islamic perspective on informal logical fallacies when these fallacies are actually discussed in various texts is a question that is in need of an answer. The answer to this kind of questions is because the informal logical fallacies as espoused in Western works and texts are grounded in a temporal human finitude. And it is taken granted as the final and unquestionable yardstick and the criteria for knowledge and evaluation. In addition to that these logical fallacies are grounded in a special kind of worldview which is materialistic and secular. Accepting these informal logical fallacies per se without any debate and discussion can be misleading.

 In addition to aforesaid concern, there are further two main issues which deserve to be addressed adequately. The first issue is some studies show that the more students learn critical thinking the less faithful they become (Gervais, W. M., & Norenzayan, A, 2012). Related to this is other claim that religious students are found less critical than non-religious

students (Corriveaua , K. H., Chenb, E. E., & Harrisc, P. L, 2014). Theses both claims go against Islam as much as they go against other religions..

The first claim that critical thinking makes students less faithful and students from religious background are less critical is problematic and faulty. If critical thinking is construed as a free thinking system with its own epistemological biases and therefore taught to students as creed without a critical reflection on its own basis and foundations, then such a critical thinking would surely make students less faithful if they learn and swallow it uncritically. Secondly, claiming that students with religious background are less critical is in the same way faulty because their criticality is being measured by wrong standards. However, their failure of being uncritical within their own tradition is because they have not been made able to be critical in their unique way because of their special upbringing and sometimes just being faithful about everything and a kind of instruction and schooling that is fundamentally based on dictation and memorizing without reflection. This lack in religious studies calls for a review and reformation of religious education and it should be taken seriously. Students of religion should be able to be critical within their own tradition.

As far as Islam and Muslims are concerned, the fact is that Muslims have their own worldview which is different from materialism and scientism. Their epistemological understanding is grounded in the special conception of ontology and their physics is incomplete without their metaphysics. And, their epistemological methods are revelational besides being rational and empirical.

In light of the above discussion and background, this study analyzes in the subsequent parts the fallacy of *Argumentum ad Hominem* (Argument Directed at the Person) its understanding in the Western critical thinking and its evaluation from Islamic perspective.

VI. Fallacies of Relevance

Argumentum ad Hominem (Argument Directed at the Person) is considered as informal logical fallacy of relevance in Western critical thinking. The development of the concept of relevance historically has its roots in Greek logic and rhetoric. Since the time of Aristotle the fallacy of irrelevance has been part of logic. It has been so throughout ages. However, "the most important source of material on how relevance is part of argumentation comes from Greek rhetorical manuals" (Walton, 2004, p. xi).

An argument is made of premises and conclusions that follow from these premises. The fallacy of relevance shows the irrelevance of premises to the conclusion. In other words, premises may be relevant to the conclusion emotionally or psychologically, but not logically.

In more precise manner, "In fallacies of relevance the premises are logically irrelevant to the conclusion. However, they are psychologically or emotionally relevant to the conclusion. Therefore, the conclusion appears or seems to follow from the premises although the premises in fact provide no genuine evidence for the conclusion" (Leclerc, 2004). Therefore, the task is to distinguish between genuine evidence from emotional appeal. To study relevance "one of the best entry points to studying relevance is through irrelevance, because objections on the basis of irrelevance in argumentation are, in some instances fairly clear and pointed, in specifying what is objectionable" (Walton, 2004, p. xi).

VII. Argumentum ad Hominem or Argument Directed at the Person

Argumentum ad Hominem fallacy is people related that sometimes arguments and ideas of the people are rejected, not because of their truth or falsehood, but because of attacking their propounding personalities. This type of fallacy is crucial because of its presence in discourses of all sorts, and having a clear position based on The Quran and Sunnah on this issue is essential for Muslims, be that students or working adults in various areas, from academia to professional fields; in fact, everybody needs to be aware about this issue because it is present in many spheres of daily life. Discussing this fallacy is important because its important connectedness to the critical mindset of people.

Argumentum ad Hominem is also known as "personal abuse, personal attacks, abusive fallacy, damning the source, name calling, needling [form of], [and] refutation by character" (Bennett, 2013). This argument revolves around "the person" who makes a statement of knowledge, or makes a claim or opinion. Instead of subjecting that claim or statement, etc to any epistemological scrutiny or discussion, it is rather accepted or rejected because of the person's personality. *The use of this fallacy is widespread (*Raley, 2008). *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* gives the following succinct definition of Argumentum ad Hominem:

ad hominem: attempting to disprove what a person holds by attacking the person (less commonly, supporting a person's contention by praising the person), or, more generally, arguing in a way that may or may not be forceful against a particular person's position, but does not advance matters for those who do not hold that person's particular combination of beliefs. (Blackburn, 1996, P.24)

Informal Structure of *ad Hominem* is as follows:

Person *L* says argument *A*. Person *L*'s circumstance or character is not satisfactory. Argument *A* is not a good argument. (GFDL, 2014)

VIII. Argumentum ad Hominem: Perspective from The Quran and Sunnah

Argumentum ad Hominem as per the aforementioned definitions has two forms: (1) a person's opinion is disapproved by attacking the person, not the argument; (2) a person's opinion is disapproved because of the person's combination of beliefs. This informal fallacy is widespread in majority of the subjects and discourses about religion, history, politics, and social issues.

As far as argumentum ad hominem is concerned, the primary Islamic sources provide fundamental guidelines and principles which can help in constructing a sound and firm perspective on the subject. In The Quran, there seems a distinction between two types of the knowledge: the transmitted knowledge (*al-ulum al-naqliyah*) and intellectual, rational, and empirical knowledge (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*). The first type of knowledge is which has come through generations by narration (*rivayah*) and it is of many types: pure and true, distorted, fabricated, interpolated etc. For any disagreement related to this kind of knowledge, The Quran demands sound evidences and authentic record from the disputing parties (The Quran, 2:111). The Quran also calls upon physical possibility and reason in weighing the truthfulness of this kind of knowledge. Regarding physical possibility of being born from a virgin birth, The Quran states, "The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: "Be". And he was" (The Quran, 3: 59).

Regarding the second type of knowledge: intellectual, rational, and empirical knowledge (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*), The Quran demands intellect (*al-aqil*) and senses (*hawas*) for its verification, falsification, and plausibility. This knowledge could be named as rational knowledge (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*). And rational knowledge in a broader sense includes both intellectual, rational (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*), and empirical knowledge (*al-ulum al-tajribiyah*). In this regard, The Quran mentions senses (*hawas*) and the intellect (Reason and Heart, *alaql wal qalb*) in many verses.

Regarding the the Senses (*hawas*), The Quran gives due consideration to senses as a means of knowledge. The Quran states, "It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affection: that ye may give thanks (to Allah)" (The Quran, 16: 78). The Quran encourages people to use their senses in understanding, for example, The Quran states, "Do they not look

at the camels, how they are made? And at the sky, how it is raised high? And the mountains, how they are fixed firm? And at the Earth, how is spread out? " (The Quran, 88: 17- 20).

Regarding the Intellect (Reason and Heart, *alaql wal qalb*), The Quran puts the intellect at very high stage in understanding and as a means of knowledge. The intellect is the combination of mind and heart. The Quran uses sometimes reasoning and sometimes heart for understanding. It seems there is a connection between the heart and reasoning and the co-functioning of them could be named as intellect. The Quran encourages people to reason as it states, "And He it is who grants life and deals death; and to Him is due the alternation of night and day. Will you not, then, use your reason?" (The Quran, 23:80). And in other verse the Quran states, "… Will you not, then, use your reason? " (The Quran, 28:60) .On the other hand The Quran encourages people to use their hearts to understand as it states, "Will they not, then, ponder over this Qur'an? - or are there locks upon their hearts?" (The Quran, 47:24).

IX. Argumentum ad Hominem and Transmitted Knowledge (al-ulum al-naqliyah)

To illustrate The Qurantic stance on the transmitted knowledge (*al-ulum al-naqliyah*), the best example is The Quranic discourse on the scriptures that were revealed before The Quran. The Quran mentions that the scriptures which were sent to the People of Book (*ahlul-kitab*) were authentic sent from Allah. Some of these revealed scriptures include the epistles, *suhuf*, of Abraham (The Quran, 87:19), the Torah revealed to Moses, *Moosa* (The Quran, 5:44), the Psalms revealed to David, Dawood(The Quran, 4:163), and the Gospel, Injeel, revealed to Jesus, Issa (The Quran, 5:46). For a Muslim, therefore, The Quran is "…a confirmation of what was before it and a detailed explanation of the [former] Scripture..." (The Quran, 10:37) Therefore, if the People of the Book make any claim which is contrary of what God had revealed originally, The Quran demands an authentic and convincing proof for such a claim. The Quran states " Produce your proof, if you should be truthful" (The Quran, 2:111).

On the other hand, The Quran sets its own guidelines in reporting any event, fact, or knowledge. These guidelines are relevant to any methodology that may be applied in transmitted knowledge (*al-ulum al-naqliyah*). These guidelines are two types.

The first type in brief includes for example, avoiding lying (The Quran, 2:10). The Quran states, **"**Only they forge the lie who do not believe in Allah's communications, and these are the liars" (The Quran, 16: 105); "… and avoid false words" (The Quran, 22:30); and

*"*Only they forge the lie who do not believe in the signs of Allah" (The Quran, 16:l05). Furthermore, The Quran encourages to avoid following of which one has no knowledge about as it states, "And follow not (O man, i.e., say not, or do not, or witness not) that of which you have no knowledge. Verily, the hearing, and the sight, and the heart of each of those ones will be questioned (by Allah)"(The Quran, 17:36) . The Quran encourages to avoid conjecture, as it states, "O ye who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin: …" (The Quran, 49: 12). The Quran advises asking proper experts regarding things one may be not be aware about. Regarding knowledge and understanding, if a person does not know, then he should turn to those who know. In this case the authority should be expert and relevant, The Quran states, "So *ask* the *people of knowledge if you know* not" (The Quran, 16:43).

The second type of guidelines includes using revelation and sound rational and scientific methods in verification and falsification of facts that are present in transmitted knowledge.

Any knowledge that is transmitted from the past is that revelation, history, or written works come under transmitted knowledge. In Islamic tradition transmitted knowledge has received enough attention in the subject area of the narrations of the Prophet Mohammad (SAW). The narrations of the Messenger are also called *Hadith.* The narration has two parts namely, chain of narrators (*sanad*) and the text (*matan*). The scholars of Hadith have set rules for accepting and rejecting Hadith; these rules are written in the books of the principles of hadith (*usool-al-hadith*). Among conditions of accepting any report, the narrator should be reliable. The most important qualities of a reliable narrator include: he should have meet the person preceding him; he must be honest, trustworthy with a good memory (Hajar,1988). Here, a Hadith could get rejected or would not be treated of high authority and authenticity if these qualities are diminished. That is why there is a collection of Hadith which is categorized as fabrications (ala*hadiith muzoah*) by Hadith (scholars because of the persons who have narrated them were found unreliable. Why Islamic tradition is strict in this matter is because the Prophetic traditions are part of religion. In this regard, Imam Muslim mentions the report of Muhammad Ibn Sirin who said: In the beginning there were no questions regarding the chain of narrator (*sanad)* but when the tribulation (*fitnah*) occurred people start asking about narrators, so those who were among beholders of Sunnah, their narrations were accepted, whereas those who held innovations (*bidah*), their narrations were rejected (Muslim).

Furthermore, Imam Muslim reported Muhammad Ibn Sirin saying, the knowledge of Hadith is religion, therefore you should know from who you are taking (learning) it(Muslim).

However, The Quran had already set a rule on accepting or rejecting reports, The Quran states, "O ye who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth…." (The Quran, 49:6) This verse includes all kinds of reports. Therefore, Islam cautions on who to take report from and who not to. Therefore, religious knowledge which is in the form of narrations and historical accounts are to be taken seriously by verifying their sources and reporters. Therefore, to transmitted knowledge (*al-ulum al-naqliyah*) argumentum ad hominem as a fallacy is *irrelevant*. In accepting transmitted knowledge, a person's character, belief system, biases, prejudices, and many other personal attributes have a meaningful role. It is because there is no other way to verify such reported knowledge. If there is any other way to verify such knowledge then that knowledge would be reliable not because of the unreliable source, but because of the reliable sources. As a general principle "the person" matters in transmitted knowledge and conditions and qualities for being a reliable person may vary according to the importance and criticality of the knowledge that is being reported.

X. Argumentum ad Hominem and Rational Knowledge (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*)

The second type of knowledge could be named as rational knowledge (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*) and in broader sense it includes both intellectual and rational (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*) and empirical knowledge (*uloom tajribiyah*). This knowledge could be verified without the person who creates it, therefore accepting or rejecting such knowledge is not in need of any investigation of the person. Islam encourages using intellect, senses, and evidences in understanding and condemns those shut themselves, as The Quran state. (The Quran, 8:22 and 27:64. The Quran stresses on providing good arguments and evidences in case of proposing a position or disagreement: The Quran states, "… Say, "Bring forth your argument, if ye are telling the truth!" (The Quran, 27:64) .

There is one distinction which is necessary to be made that there is a difference between accepting, debating, rejecting, testing, and verifying intellectual and rational (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*) and empirical knowledge (*uloom tajribiyah*) and following that kind of knowledge. Particularly, when it is about religion and faith, Muslims should be open to all sorts of arguments from whosoever they come from as it could be seen in The Quran it addresses opinions and arguments of people and religions, and for sure all their arguments were theological in nature; however, when it is about following religion then The Quran

demands that Muslims should follow the knowledgeable among themselves. The Quran states, "O ye who believe! obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger, if ye do believe in Allah and the Last Day: that is best, and most suitable for final determination" (The Quran, 4: 59 and4:83) . However, scholars who are authorities are not free to explain or make religious positions without adopting proper methodologies in a convincing manner that is why in the preceding verse of The Quran, it is mentioned "… If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger …" (The Quran, 4: 59) That is why unanimously respected scholars such as founders of Islamic jurisprudential schools -- Al-Imam Abu Hanifa (b.6990), Imam Malik Malik ibn Anas (b.711), Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'I (b.767) and Al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal al-Shaybani (b.778) -- have differed with each other on scores of issues because of their methodological preferences and arguments. Their scholarship is not whimsical, but profound and prolific. Yet, these scholars differed with each other and are equally respected and accepted as the great leading scholars of Islam. The differences and disagreements between these scholars are purely based on discourse. The implication to critical mindset that Muslims should posses is that criticism of any religious discourse should be discourse-centered, not the personality-centered, and disagreeing with a scholar on few issues and rejecting his position on few issues by convincing counterargument does not mean that the rest of what he has said should be rejected too. Therefore, to rational, intellectual, and scientific knowledge (*al-ulum al-aqliyah*) argumentum ad hominem as fallacy is *relevant* because to this knowledge "the person" is not part of its verification and falsification, rather it's his arguments and thought.

XI. Conclusion

The fallacy of Argumentum ad Hominem is *irrelevant* in Islamic tradition when historical reports and narrations are rejected because of the unreliability and known vices of a person as being a liar, untrustworthy, having a sectarian bias, and dishonest. As far as the understanding of religion is concerned, this fallacy also does not affect in accepting or respecting the opinion as far as the opinion is backed by good evidences and arguments. In the same manner if a reliable person gives account on any subject his evidences also are in need of verification. Being pious does not guarantee soundness of an argument. However, the followers of religion should follow pious scholars regarding the opinions on religious matters as a caution they are not mislead. But after scrutiny, this condition only applies to those who do not have enough capacity to understand and think or weight the worth of the argument or

opinion. For those, who are able and have intellectual capacity and can understand the issues of religion, this condition does not apply. Regarding rational and empirical knowledge, Muslims are encouraged to learn and know from every possible way because the knowledge is based on reason, accepted evidences, data, and methods. Therefore, Argumentum ad Hominem is relevant to this kind of knowledge.

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