



# THE ART OF DEBATE AND DISPUTATION

**FREE**

**DR. SAFARUK  
CHOWDHURY**



# 1.1 The Ten Essentials

- The Ten Essentials (*al-mabadi' al-'ashr*) of Ibn Sabban (d.1206/1792):

إن مبادئ كل فن عشرة \*\*\*\*\* الحد والموضوع ثم الثمرة  
وفضله ونسبة والواضع \*\*\*\*\* والاسم الاستمداد حكم الشارع  
مسائل والبعض بالبعض اكتفى \*\*\*\*\* ومن درى الجميع نال الشرفا

The essentials of every discipline are ten:  
The definition, the subject-matter and then the fruits,  
Its virtues, relations and pioneers,  
Its names, sources, its legal ruling  
And issues. Learning some will suffice,  
But learning them all will make one attain nobility!

# 1.2 The Importance of Debate

- Debate (*munazara*), discussion (*hiwar*) and dialectics (*jadal*) is very important in the context of *da'wa*:
  - Delivering Islam to others means giving arguments and proofs for its truth claims.
  - Delivering Islam means others will oppose and argue with us so we have to be ready to defend and counter the arguments.
  - We may be carrying incorrect ideas about debating and thus conducting ourselves unislamically/unprophetically while debating - knowing the science of argumentation will help us have the right knowledge (analogy with *fiqh*).
  - The Qur'an itself commands the believers to invite to the way of Allah and to debate non-believers (e.g. 16:125).

# Quote of Imam al-Nasafi (d.710/1310)

*Madarik al-Tanzil*, 2:893:

“(call to the way of your Lord), to Islam (with wisdom), with sound and clear discourse, which is evidence that leads to the Truth and removes doubt (and with good admonition), in a way that it is clear to them that you are advising them with it and that you want them to benefit from it; or it means admonishing them with the Qur’an, i.e. ‘call to them with the Book which contains wisdom and the best admonition’ or ‘call to them with that which contains various levels of good and prudent actions and a balanced discourse involving hope, fear, good news but warnings as well. (and debate them with what is most beautiful), in the best way of argumentation, the most beautiful way, which includes compassion, softness and not harshness or by that which awakens the heart, stirs the souls, enlightens the intellects. This is evidence against those who deny that argumentation is part of the religion.”

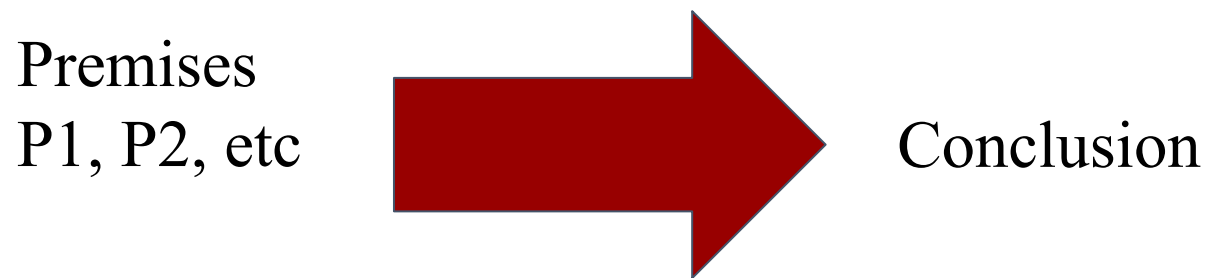
{ ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ } إِلَى الْإِسْلَامِ { بِالْحِكْمَةِ } بِالْمَقَالَةِ  
الصَّحِيحَةِ الْمَحْكَمَةِ وَهُوَ الدَّلِيلُ الْمَوْضُوحُ لِلْحَقِّ الْمَزِيلِ لِلشَّبْهَةِ }  
وَالْمَوْعِظَةُ الْحَسَنَةُ { وَهِيَ الَّتِي لَا يَخْفَى عَلَيْهِمْ أَنَّكَ تَنَاصَحُهُمْ  
بِهَا وَتَقْصِدُ مَا يَنْفَعُهُمْ فِيهَا، أَوْ بِالْقُرْآنِ أَيِ ادْعُهُمْ بِالْكِتَابِ الَّذِي  
هُوَ حِكْمَةٌ وَمَوْعِظَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ، أَوْ الْحِكْمَةَ الْمَعْرِفَةَ بِمَرَاتِبِ الْأَفْعَالِ  
وَالْمَوْعِظَةَ الْحَسَنَةَ أَنْ يَخْلُطَ الرَّغْبَةَ بِالرَّهْبَةِ وَالْإِنْذَارَ بِالْبَشَارَةِ  
{ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ } بِالطَّرِيقَةِ الَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ طَرِيقِ  
الْمُجَادَلَةِ مِنَ الرَّفْقِ وَاللِّينِ مِنْ غَيْرِ فِظَاطَةٍ، أَوْ بِمَا يَوْقِظُ الْقُلُوبَ  
وَيُعِظُ النُّفُوسَ وَيَجْلُو الْعُقُولَ وَهُوَ رَدُّ عَلَى مَنْ يَأْبَى الْمُنَازَرَةَ  
فِي الدِّينِ

# 1.3 Dialects, Debate and Islamic Culture

- Dialectics and debate was part of the Islamic culture and was related to the religious sciences like *tafsir*, *hadith* and Arabic:
  - For *halal* and *haram* matters we need to study the science of *fiqh*, for knowledge of *hadith* we need the science of Hadith and for understanding the Qur'an we need the science of *tafsir*; similarly for augmentation and debate we need to study the science of debate.
  - Debate and argumentation was part of the intellectual tradition and landscape of Islam.
  - Dialects as a genre (area of study) developed over time in different phases and with different sources starting with revelation and evolving over a millennium.

# 2.1 What are Arguments?

- An **argument** is a group of statements that lead to another statement (a **conclusion**).
  - A statement is a sentence that can be either true or false.
  - A statement in an argument justifying or providing support for the conclusion is a **premise**.
  - The conclusion is the statement that is being proved or argued for.
- A conclusion reached on the basis of some pattern of reasoning is called an **inference**.
- The science of studying reasoning behind arguments is **logic**.
  - Logic is very important as it protects us from committing errors in our reasoning and hence from formulating bad arguments.



*A link between the two based on a rule*

# Quote of Imam al-Ghazali (d.505/1111)

*Maqasid al-Falasifa*, 13:

“The science of Logic consists of laws by which to distinguish sound definitions and syllogisms from unsound ones. Through it, one distinguishes certain knowledge from what is not certain. [Logic] is like a scale, a rubric for all sciences. Whatever cannot be measured by a scale cannot determine success from failure or loss from profit.”

علم المنطق هو القانون الذي به يميز صحيح الحد  
والقياس عن فاسدهما، فيتميز العلم اليقين عما ليس بيقين  
وكأنه الميزان والمعيار للعلوم كلها وكل ما لم يوزن  
بالميزان لم يتميز فيه الرجحان عن النقصان ولا الربح  
عن الخسران

## 2.2 Deductive Arguments

- A deductive argument.
  - In the process of deduction, you begin with some statements, called “premises,” that are assumed to be true, you then determine what else would have to be true if the premises are true.
  - With deduction you can provide absolute proof of your conclusions, given that your premises are correct. The premises themselves, however, may remain unproven and even unprovable. All that’s needed is the conclusion following from the premises.



# Example 1: Qur'an 52:35

﴿٣٥﴾ أَمْ خُلِقُوا مِنْ غَيْرِ شَيْءٍ أَمْ هُمُ الْخَالِقُونَ

﴿٣٦﴾ أَمْ خَلَقُوا السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بَلْ لَا يُوقِنُونَ

- From these verses, you can deduce the following argument:
  1. The universe is finite.
  2. Finite things could have come from nothing, created themselves, been ultimately created by something created, or been created by something uncreated.
  3. They could not have come from nothing, created themselves, or have been ultimately created by something created.
  4. Therefore, they were created by something uncreated.

## 2.2 Inductive Arguments

- An inductive argument.
  - In the process of induction, you begin with some data, and then determine what general conclusion(s) can *logically be derived from that data*. In other words, you determine what theory or theories could explain the data.
  - An inductive argument has a *defeasible* conclusion, i.e. can be made false in light of new data.
  - What is important in induction is that the theory does indeed offer a logical explanation of the data.

## 2.3 Core Inference Rules

- In logic, there is a special way, form or pattern by which we move from premises to a conclusion. These ways, forms and patterns are called **inference rules**.
  - There are 9 core inference rules of logic. The list is given below:
    1. Modus Ponens: If P then Q, P, Therefore Q
    2. Modus Tollens: If P then Q, Not Q, Therefore not P
    3. Hypothetical Syllogism: If P then Q, If Q then R, Therefore if P then R
    4. Disjunctive Syllogism: P or Q, Not P, Therefore Q
    5. Conjunction: P, Q, Therefore P and Q
    6. Constructive Dilemma: (If P then Q) and (If R then S), P or R, Therefore Q or S
    7. Simplification: P and Q, Therefore P
    8. Absorption: If P then Q, Therefore, if P (P or Q)
    9. Addition: P, Therefore P or Q

## 2.4 Fallacies

- Fallacies are serious errors in reasoning.
  - Fallacies must be avoided as they do not serve any purpose for truth or validity when it comes to arguments. They sabotage and undermine the *da'wa* rather than support it because they are deceptive and contain flaws.
- There are many fallacies and different categorisations of them. Some common ones are:

- Ad hominem.
- Strawman.
- Appeal to Ignorance.
- Slippery Slope.
- Circular.
- Hasty Generalisation.
- Appeal to Pity.
- Appeal to Authority.
- Bandwagon Fallacy

- Affirming the Consequent.
- Denying the Antecedent
- Equivocation

# 3.1 The Qur'an on Argumentation

- The Qur'an is full of arguments. It is a highly polemical books.
  - Arguments is a part of the Qur'anic discourse.
  - It contains arguments the Prophets and Messengers articulated to bring their people to the Truth of revelation.
  - There is a vocabulary of argumentation in the Qur'an.
  - Argumentation and debate is a Qur'anic directive.

# 3.1 The Qur'an and Fallacies

- The Qur'an mentions numerous fallacies in order to show how bad arguments were used either to reject the Message of the Prophet or the Prophets themselves.
- Some examples of fallacies include:
  - **Ad baculum** (argument by force): threatening violence to get someone to accept an argument or claim, e.g. 11:92, 21:68.
  - **Ad hominem** (attacking the person): discrediting a person in order make their argument or claim sound false, e.g. 11:27.

# 3.1 The Qur'anic vs. Philosophical Approach

- The Qur'anic approach to argumentation is different from the philosophical approach. The difference is given below:

<b>Qur'an</b>	<b>Philosophical</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Natural language for arguments</li><li>○ Different types of arguments (psychological, legal, etc)</li><li>○ Easy to understand.</li><li>○ Simple and straightforward.</li><li>○ Deep, insightful and penetrative.</li><li>○ Appeals to the natural world to make arguments.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Artificial language for arguments</li><li>○ Logical form of arguments</li><li>○ Technical and hard to understand</li><li>○ Complex.</li><li>○ Requires specialised knowledge</li><li>○ Appeals to wild speculation and thinking.</li></ul>

## 3.2 The Sunnah and Argumentation

- The Prophet's Sunna contains many examples of arguments.
  - In the process of induction, you begin with some data, and then determine what general



# 4.1 Censured and Praiseworthy Debate

- The types of debate that is censured (blameworthy) includes:
  - Debating to attack, slander, defame or create hatred and enmity.
  - Debating to belittle the religion of Islam, revelation or things that are sacred in it.
  - Debating to create doubt and confusion.
  - Debating to promote heresy, *bid'a*, disbelief (*kufr*) and anything against the Shariah.
  - Debating non-beneficial and unlawful matters in the religion.
- The type of debate that is good (praiseworthy) includes:
  - Debating to defend, strengthen and promote the religion of Islam, its beliefs, laws and ideas.
  - Debating to exonerate Allah from false claims and raising the honour of the Prophet Muhammad.
  - Debating to find the truth of some matter.
  - Debating to uphold the confidence and conviction in Islam.

## 4.2 Who to Avoid Debating

- One should avoid debating any:
  - Ignorant folk.
  - Heretics.
  - Sectarian people.
  - Those disinterested in hearing the truth.
  - The youth.
  - Argumentative people.
  - Unjust people (including rulers).
- One can debate the following:
  - Sincere people.
  - Truth-seeking individuals.
  - Sensible and mature persons.
  - The People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*).
  - Anyone attacking, maligning, distorting Islam.
  - Other Muslims when it is to establish the strongest proof.

## 4.3 When and When not to Debate

- One should avoid debating when:
  - One is not prepared.
  - There is no need.
  - If it is for one's ego.
  - If it is for partisanship/sectarianism and not the truth.
  - If it is for fame, popularity, likes, worldly gain.
- One should debate when:
  - Islam (shariah, Islamic sanctities) is under attack.
  - The honour of the Prophet is under attack.
  - When truth needs to come out.
  - When ideas of falsehood are gaining the upper hand.
  - It requires training others to learn the art of debate.

# 4.4 Qualities of a Debater

- The core qualities of a debater include:
  - Knowledge.
  - Compassion.
  - Sincerity.
  - Humility.
  - Experience.
  - Eloquence.
  - Organisation.
- A debater must:
  - Seek Allah's help,
  - trust in Allah,
  - make the best preparation,
  - appear formidable.
  - Have the best qualities, manners and etiquette.

# 4.5 Dangers of Debating

- Being preoccupied with debating and arguing leads to dangers such as:
  - Wasting time.
  - Inflating one's ego.
  - Arrogance.
  - Harshness.
  - Hard-heartedness.
  - Addiction.
  - Exhibitionism.
  - Vindictiveness and vengefulness.
  - Little moral development.
  - Becoming a sectarian person.

# Quote from al-Ghazali

*Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, 1:66:

Know and realise that debating for the sake of overcoming and defeating one's opponent or to manifest one's own excellence and nobility or to boast in front of people or to intend to brag and win people's approval are all the source of the the most blameworthy qualities according to Allah and the most praiseworthy according to Allah's enemy Iblis."

اعلم وتحقق أن المناظرة الموضوعية لقصد الغلبة والإفحام وإظهار الفضل والشرف والتشدد عند الناس وقصد المباهاة والممارسة واستمالة وجوه الناس هي منبع جميع الأخلاق المذمومة عند الله المحمودة عند  
عدو الله إبليس