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## Arguments with Khomeini: Rhetorical situation and persuasive style in cross-cultural perspective

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### *Abstract*

*In 1979, the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci was granted an interview with Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. The interview turned into an abusive argument. Examination of the text of the interview suggests what went wrong. Explanations focus on two levels: the level of strategies of logical argumentation, and the level of choices of overall persuasive style, logical versus analogical. There are cultural reasons for Khomeini's and Fallaci's predisposition to use different rhetorical strategies on both levels; however, rhetorical strategies emerge in particular situations, and interlocutors communicating in good faith can adapt to one another's styles.*

### **1. Introduction**

More often than not, studies of cross-cultural communication arise from observations of cross-cultural miscommunication. This study is no exception; it has as its starting point an extreme example of what can go wrong when two people with very different epistemologies and norms for communicative behavior, as well as apparently clashing personalities, attempt to use language to change each other's minds. The result is not the sort of subtle lack of understanding that makes people say 'I'm not sure whether I knew what he was talking about', or 'Somehow I didn't feel as if I was getting my point across'. Rather, the result is crude verbal violence and complete failure to communicate.

One advantage of looking at extreme examples like the one I will discuss is that there is no question that what is going on is problematic, as 'bad' as

a sentence like 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously' is bad. Another reason for looking at egregious miscommunications is that they are very common, more common than one would like to think. The sorts of problems I will deal with here are the kind which lead people to give up on verbal communication and resort to violence, the problems which can lead to brutality, terrorism, and war. If the two intelligent and, in other contexts, articulate interlocutors I will discuss can so utterly fail to communicate, it is easy to see how little it takes for people who are less intelligent and less articulate to start hitting.

The failed communication I will look at is an interview by a Western journalist, Oriana Fallaci, with the Ayatollah Khomeini, carried out in 1979. After describing the text in detail and showing what goes wrong in it, I will suggest several ways of talking about failures in rhetorical communication, communication which is intended to be persuasive. While the interviewer in the text I will examine is Italian and the interviewee Iranian, this is not a comparison of Italian and Iranian 'rhetorical styles'; I will argue in the final section of the paper that the notion of a direct correlation between 'culture' and 'rhetoric' is a simplistic one which obscures the multitude of factors that are responsible for an individual's choice of persuasive tactics in a particular situation.

## 2. Anatomy of a communicative collapse

On October 7, 1979, in the middle of the Iran hostage crisis and when U.S. relations with Iran were at their worst, the *New York Times Magazine* published as its lead article an interview with the Ayatollah Khomeini (Fallaci, 1979). The interviewer, Oriana Fallaci, is an Italian journalist known for interviews which are incisive and revealing, if sometimes uncomfortable for the interviewees. Fallaci's interview with Khomeini was revealing, but not in the usual way. What the text of Fallaci's talks with Khomeini reveals is a quick and total communicative breakdown, a breakdown that can be accounted for in part with reference to the radically different persuasive strategies<sup>1</sup> of the two discussants, and, at a deeper level, to differences in cultural models of what language is and how language is to be used.

The format of the interview is the standard question and answer sequence, but because Fallaci talks almost as much as Khomeini does and expresses opinions which conflict with Khomeini's, the talk is more like a heated

conversation than like a neutral fact-finding session. The interview took place in Qum, the city where Khomeini resides, at a religious school. After waiting ten days for an audience, Fallaci spent two sessions, on successive days, with Khomeini, accompanied by two Iranian translators. During these sessions, Fallaci sat on a carpet facing Khomeini, dressed at least part of the time in a *chador*, the black covering worn by some Moslem women. The *Times* article is headed by a description of the setting and a photo of Fallaci with Khomeini.

Fallaci begins the interview by challenging Khomeini, asking whether there is freedom in Iran, whether Khomeini is a dictator, and whether the fanatic Iranian mobs are dangerous. The following excerpt, from the beginning of the text, illustrates her style, as well as Khomeini's.

*Fallaci:* . . . But you frighten people, as I said. And even this mob which calls your name is frightening. What do you feel — hearing them calling out like this, day and night, knowing that they are there, all of them there sitting for hours, being shoved about, suffering, just to see you for a moment, and to sing your praises?

*Khomeini:* I enjoy it. I enjoy hearing and seeing them. Because they are the same ones who rose up to throw out the internal and external enemies. Because their applause is the continuation of the cry with which the usurper was thrown out. It is good that they continue to be agitated, because the enemies have not disappeared. Until the country has settled down, the people must remain fired up, ready to march and attack again. In addition, this is love, an intelligent love. It is impossible not to enjoy it.

There is talk about other general ideas: freedom, democracy, censorship, the political left. In this section of the interview, Fallaci becomes increasingly insistent on definitions. One feels that she is surprised by Khomeini's responses and needs to make sure that she and he are really talking about the same issues. She begins to ask questions like these:

So, when you speak of 'the people,' you refer exclusively to the people connected with the Islamic movement.

At this point, Imam, I must ask you what you mean by freedom.

And by democracy, what do you mean, Imam?

Soon after this question about democracy, the first clear signs of a break-

down in the discussion begin to appear. Fallaci and Khomeini are unable to agree about what 'democracy' means, and Khomeini says,

If you foreigners do not understand, too bad for you. It's none of your business, you have nothing to do with our choices. If some Iranians don't understand it, too bad for them. It means that they have not understood Islam.

The discussion now shifts into specifics. Fallaci asks about the five hundred executions that took place after the revolution in Iran, about the rebellious Kurds, about the Shah, the Shah's sister Farah Diba, deposed prime minister Bakhtiar, the Islamic law of the four wives, the music of Bach. The debate becomes more acrimonious and personal. Fallaci lists the ways Iranian women are segregated and the things they may not do, ending with:

... By the way, how do you swim in a chador?

Khomeini answers:

This is none of your business. Our customs are none of your business. If you do not like Islamic dress you are not obliged to wear it. Because Islamic dress is for good and proper women.

Immediately thereafter, Fallaci strips off what she calls 'this stupid, medieval rag'. Shortly thereafter, Khomeini throws her out:

And now that's enough. Go away. Go away.

The report in the *Times* of Fallaci's interaction with Khomeini does little, in the end, to give readers any clear idea of what Khomeini thinks. While the text has shock and entertainment value, it is far from being what we would think of as a successful interview. Khomeini and Fallaci both come out sounding nasty and vituperative, and appearing to be poor communicators. There is external as well as internal evidence that things did not go as well as at least Khomeini would have liked: Shortly after the interview was published, Khomeini, described in a *Time* article (1979) as 'still fuming about his unflattering portrayal' in it, refused to speak to Western journalists again.

Let us turn now to a more detailed analysis of the interview, to uncover exactly what went wrong.

### 3. Uses of argument

Khomeini's and Fallaci's talk, at least in the first half of the interview, is persuasive in intent (if not in effect). That is, each interlocutor is trying to make the other believe his or her claims: Khomeini's supporters are fanatics (Fallaci); Iranian leftists did not fight or suffer during the revolution (Khomeini); and so on. One way of examining what goes awry in all of these attempts to persuade is to look at the *argumentation* used by the interlocutors in the interview, that is, at the ways they use propositions to provide support for other propositions.

The model I will use to describe Khomeini's and Fallaci's argumentation is one which is based on the Aristotelian notion of the syllogism, the three-part structure in which a major premise (a generally accepted statement, like 'All men are mortal') and a minor premise (a true statement about the situation at hand, like 'Socrates is a man') are placed together to demonstrate the validity of a conclusion ('Socrates is mortal'). Specifically, my model is based on that of Toulmin (1958), from whom the title of this section is borrowed.<sup>2</sup> The model is illustrated, with an example, in Figure 1.

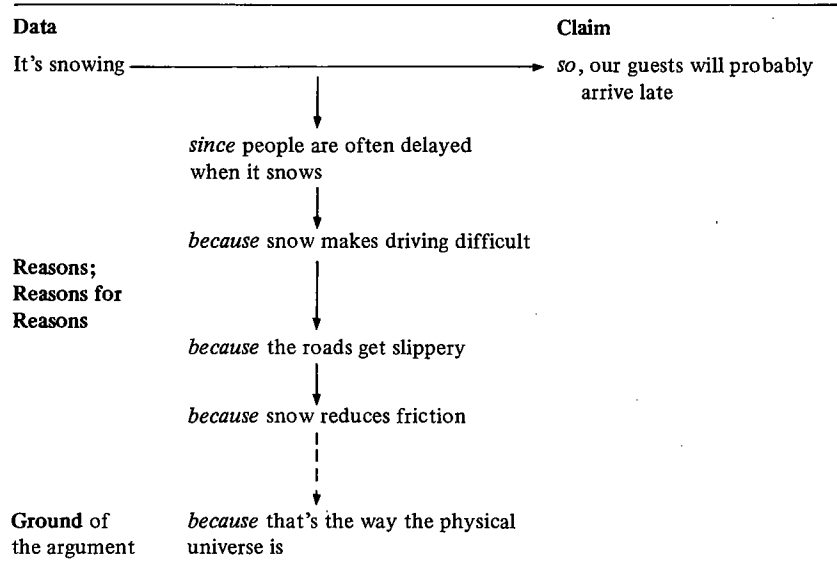


Figure 1: *A model of argumentation*

The way the model works is this: Whenever a person makes a *claim* of any sort, like 'Our guests will probably arrive late', he or she is accountable for producing, if asked to, the *data* on which the claim is based ('It's snowing'). In arguments like this one, a speaker is usually not called on to state exactly what relationship between the data and the claim (or what *reason*) serves to make the data support the claim. But the proposition which connects the two underlies the argument, and can be made overt if necessary ('People are often delayed when it snows').

So far, the model replicates the three-part syllogism, with 'data' as minor premise, 'claim' as conclusion, and 'reason' as major premise. But, as Toulmin points out (and as anyone with a three-year-old child knows), there is more than one level of reasons for claims. If pressed, an arguer is responsible for stating a whole series of reasons for reasons and reasons for those reasons, to the point at which there simply aren't, in the arguer's world, any more reasons. At this point, the arguer has reached his or her *ground* level, the point at which the only thing to say is 'Because that's just the way things are', 'Because God made it that way', or 'Because I said so'.

There are several ways in which Khomeini's way of arguing differs from Fallaci's. The first has to do with what counts as an acceptable relationship between a datum and a claim. Fallaci begins the interview by saying:

Imam Khomeini, the entire country is in your hands. Every decision you make is an order. So there are many in your country who say that in Iran there is no freedom, that the revolution did not bring freedom.

Fallaci's claim is 'In Iran there is no freedom'; her datum is 'The entire country is in your hands'. The relationship, or reason, if made explicit, is 'If the entire country is in one person's hands, there is no freedom'. This sounds acceptable to *New York Times* readers; we are used to this sort of conception of what constitutes freedom.

We do not have the same reaction to Khomeini's response, however. Khomeini says:

Iran is not in my hands. It is in the hands of the people, because it was the people who handed the country over to the person who is their servant, and who wants only what is good for them.

This argument involves a claim ('Iran is not in my hands') and a datum ('The

people handed the country over to me') which are related through a concept of freedom with which we are not so familiar: 'If people put themselves under someone else's control, they have shown that they are free'. Our difficulty with this notion is what makes it so odd to hear East Bloc officials claiming that their countries are free, and it is at the heart of the debate about religious cults and 'deprogramming'.

There are many examples of this sort of difference in the interview: differences between the two interlocutors' assumptions about what can count as a datum for a given claim. But there is another kind of difference between Fallaci's and Khomeini's arguments, which works on a much deeper level and has more important consequences: Khomeini constantly makes explicit mention of the *ground of his arguments*, the deepest, most basic presumption on which all others rest. In doing this, he makes use of an argumentative strategy which is very different from that of Fallaci.

For Khomeini, the ultimate reason for everything is Islam. Islam is the ground of every argument, and Khomeini makes this repeatedly clear:

I act for [the people's] good. That is, to apply the Commandments of Islam. Islam is justice. Dictatorship is the greatest sin in the religion of Islam. Fascism and Islam are absolutely incompatible.

For Islam. The people fought for Islam. And Islam means everything, all those things that, in your world, are called freedom, democracy. Yes, Islam contains everything. Islam includes everything. Islam is everything.<sup>3</sup>

To begin with, the word Islam does not need adjectives such as democratic. Precisely because Islam is everything, it means everything. It is sad for us to add another word near the word Islam, which is perfect.

It is not surprising that Islam should be the ground of all of Khomeini's arguments. What is surprising, however, is that he continually makes explicit mention of his ground. We would find it very strange if Fallaci were ever to say 'Christianity is justice', or 'Western democracy is perfect', or 'Islam is evil'.<sup>4</sup> She does not, and in fact we are never sure just what the grounds of her arguments are.

Each party in an argumentative dialogue would like to be the one to set the ground for the arguments, since the ground determines what kind of arguments can be made. In the course of an argument, each arguer makes attempts, some subtle, some not, to shift the ground to where he or she wants it. One way of establishing the ground is to make explicit mention of the

ground on which one wants the debate to be based. But this is a risky strategy: If one arguer offers his or her ground in this way and the other arguer refuses to accept it, the dialogue is stalemated. Once a person has said 'Islam is perfect', or 'Communism must be wiped out at all cost', it would be an admission of defeat to have to say, 'Well, maybe Islam isn't perfect', or 'Maybe Communism isn't all that bad'. For this reason, the strategy of stating one's ground is used mainly in situations in which there is little risk of the ground's not being accepted. A politician might say 'Communism must be eradicated' to a group of conservative Americans, but in a group of third-world leaders, his attempts to establish this ground for argument would be far more subtle. The risk of mentioning one's ground also accounts for the impassioned quality of arguments in which people do this.

Certainly, Khomeini's overt statements of his argumentative ground create a sense of passion. But as steps in a strategy for winning arguments with Fallaci, they fail. Fallaci clearly does not think Islam is perfect; every time Khomeini makes overt mention of Islam, Fallaci abruptly changes the subject, as we see in the following interchange:

*Khomeini:* . . . Islam includes everything. Islam is everything.

*Fallaci:* At this point, Imam, I must ask you what you mean by freedom.

Through Fallaci's rejection of Khomeini's argumentative ground, Khomeini is left at the end of his resources, and by never making her argumentative ground explicit, Fallaci is able to keep the talk going the way she wants it to go.

The breakdown which results from this clash of argumentative strategies begins to be evident in the middle of the interview. Khomeini begins to say, 'Stop talking about these things. I am tired', and 'Enough. I have said enough'. He no longer mentions Islam. From the perspective of a revolutionary Shiite, perhaps Khomeini has no other choice but to end the discussion; in refusing to accept what for him is the only ground on which arguments can be built, Fallaci misses the point of everything Khomeini is trying to say. But from a Western perspective, Fallaci is the winner. Khomeini's strategy has failed, and he appears out of control and foolish.

What accounts for this? Why should a leader of Khomeini's stature, who has, after all, lived extensively in the West, seem to be such a poor persuader, to the extent of choosing an argumentative strategy that is bound to fail in this context? For one thing, it is in the nature of an interview that the inter-

viewer is in the stronger position from the outset. The interviewer controls the discussion by suggesting topics, and can thus propose or reject argumentative grounds. Fallaci is free to, and does, say things like 'Let's talk about freedom and democracy, Imam, and let's do it like this', or 'Let's consider for a moment the justice administered by the clergy, Imam'. And Fallaci is a skilled interviewer whose fame rests largely on her ability to exploit her subjects' argumentative weaknesses.

For another thing, as we have seen, the facts and values Khomeini uses in constructing his arguments are very different from those used by Fallaci. He appeals to reasons for his claims which, for a Westerner, do not constitute proof. Moreover, because the ground for all his arguments (Islam is everything) is not shared by his Western audience, the essential agreement on which an argumentative dialogue is built is never established.

There is, however, another explanation for Khomeini's and Fallaci's failure to communicate. The foregoing description of the interview, while it explains part of what went wrong, is based on an analysis of logical argumentation, and logical argumentation is only one of the many ways in which people persuade other people of things. In what follows, I turn to an analysis of another strategy of persuasion which is evident in the interview.

#### **4. Analogical persuasion**

We have so far proceeded on the tacit assumption that persuasion is entirely the result of argumentation. This assumption underlies a great deal of Western theorizing about persuasion; it has its roots in classical sources like Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, in which rhetorical persuasion is seen as 'the counterpart of dialectic', and is described in terms similar to those used to describe demonstrative logical proof. People do, clearly, persuade each other by means of argumentation. However, there are other ways of persuading. Let us now look again at what goes on in the Khomeini-Fallaci interview with an eye to seeing what else, besides argumentation, is happening.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Khomeini's talk throughout the interview is his frequent and insistent use of parables and analogies. For example, he tells this story about Ali and the Jew:

When Ali [the seventh-century Imam whom Shiite Moslems believe to be the first rightful Moslem leader after Muhammad] succeeded the Prophet, and

became head of the Islamic state – and this consideration had all the power, and his reign extended from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, and included a large part of Asia and also of Europe – he happened to have a dispute with a Jew. And the Jew had him called by the judge, and Ali accepted the summons of the judge, and went to him. And when he entered the room, the judge stood up, but Ali said to him angrily, ‘Why do you stand up when I enter the room but not when the Jew entered? Before a judge the two contending parties should be treated the same way’. Afterward, he accepted the sentence, which was unfavorable to him. I ask you, you who know history, can you give me a better example of democracy?

Khomeini also uses elaborate analogies, like the following:

If your finger suffers from gangrene, what do you do? Do you let the whole hand, and then the body, become filled with gangrene, or do you cut the finger off? What brings corruption to an entire country and its people must be pulled up like the weeds that infest a field of wheat.

When we have been bitten by a snake, we are even afraid of a piece of rope which from afar looks like a snake. And you have bitten us too much, and too long.

I shall say this. We are like the child that is only six months old. Our revolution is only six months old. And it is a revolution that took place in a country that was eaten alive like a field of wheat infested with locusts. We are at the beginning of our road. What do you expect of a child that is six months old, born in a field filled with locusts, after 2,500 years of bad harvests and 50 years of poisonous harvests? That past cannot be wiped out in a few months, not even in a few years. We need time.

What Khomeini is doing here and in many other places in the interview is to attempt to persuade Fallaci by making her associate the world they are discussing with another world, having her make a lateral jump from the situation at hand to a set of terms in which it can be seen. The relationship between the two is never explicit, and it is not a ‘logical’ one: The six-month-old child in the final analogy above has no temporal or causal relationship with Iran; neither is Iran really similar to a child. Rather, the listener is invited to imagine the idea of the child superimposed on the idea of Iran, so that Iran is seen through it. This is the basic principle of metaphor, the kind of horizontal reasoning that G. Bateson calls ‘abduction’ (1979: 139), a term which contrasts nicely with the vertical ‘induction’ and ‘deduction’ which figure so strongly in argumentative modes of persuading.

