

*Animals in Islamic Philosophy:
Humility to Nature and The Bounds of Humanity*

Glossary:

- Cosmology: religious explanation of the structure and origin of the cosmos
- Anthropocentrism: paradigm regarding humanity as the most important or superior animals
- Gnosis: I use this to refer to the Sufi idea of *fanā'* in Arabic. Conceptualizations differ but it generally refers to the “annihilation” of the self in spiritual union with God.
- *Khalīfa* or “vicegerent”: the Qur’ān refers to Adam, the first human, as the *khalīfat Allah* or “vicegerent” of God. Islamic scholars widely interpret this title to mean that humans have a divinely ordained position as the link between God and the created world

Abstract:

I take a survey, history of ideas approach to study the role of animals in the Islamic thought. Philosophers and mystics in the Islamic tradition generally seek to reconcile the innate anthropocentrism of Islamic cosmology with the Aristotelian axiom that humans are animals. Thus, animals are central to the philosophical question of human nature and the justification for an anthropocentric worldview. Most commonly, philosophers such al-Bīrūnī and al-Jāhīz distinguish humans from other animals based on their unique rational faculties which enable them to overcome animal nature. Others propose that non-rational intuition is what distinguishes humans from all other animals. The 13th century scholar Ibn ‘Arabī takes a unique position by claiming that one must both embody rational intelligence and embrace animal nature in order to become the “Perfect Human” — a divergence from the transcendence paradigm. I conclude by arguing that even in spite of the prevalence of this paradigm, and the canon’s innate anthropocentrism, animals have also been consistently used by Islamic philosophers from the 8th century to the modern era to push for an ecological ethic of humility in the face of a natural world created by God.

Introduction

Non-human animals (henceforth “animals”) have played a significant role in Islamic scholarship since the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur’ān describes all of creation, including animals as *musakhkhar* (subjected or serviceable) for humans.¹ Surah al-Naḥl states “livestock, He has created them for you. In them are warmth and [other] benefits; and you may eat of them,” and “it is He who has subjected the sea, so that you may eat fresh fish from it and bring forth ornaments that you may wear.”² Thus, through Adam, humanity was endowed as *khalīfat Allāh*, “God’s vicegerent” to rule over creation.³ Though Muslim exegetes have always debated these verses, Islamic philosophers have overwhelmingly accepted this anthropocentric interpretation.

At the same time, zoological knowledge has shaped the role of animals in Islamic philosophy since the medieval period. In the 9th century, a recension of Aristotle’s zoological works was first translated into Arabic, most likely by the Assyrian Yaḥyā ibn al-Biṭrīq. It is likely that Aristotle’s corpus either introduced or solidified the scientific idea that humans are animals within the Islamic world. Zoologists across the medieval Islamic world widely cited Aristotle’s *Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*), either as a direct source or as inspiration for new bestiaries.⁴ Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. ~869) considered humans to be animals, albeit superior to others.⁵ Likewise, the incipit of ‘Ibn Durayhim al-Mawṣilī’s 14th century bestiary, *Book on the*

¹ Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur’an* (Cambridge: Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization, 2012), 74.

² Qur’ān 16:5-14

³ Qur’ān 2:30

⁴ Anna Contadini, *A World of Beasts: A Thirteenth-century Illustrated Arabic Book on Animals (the Kitāb Na't Al-Ḥayawān) in the Ibn Bakhtīshū' Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 48.

⁵ al-Jāḥiẓ, Charles Pellat, and D.M. Hawke, *The Life and Works of Jāḥiẓ* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 137.

Usefulness of Animals (Kitāb Mināfi' al-Ḥayawān), states, “man is the foremost of all animals.” Indeed, both authors’ works show clear influence of Aristotle and seem to evidence the transmission of his idea into the Islamic world.⁶ These ideas espoused by the Qur’ān and by Islamic zoological works are foundational to Islamic philosophy on animals. The attitudes towards animals contained in both the Qur’ān and these Islamic zoological works are crucial context for any study of animals in Islamic philosophy. I take a survey approach, comparing the role of animals in Islamic philosophy from the 9th century to the 20th century. Predominantly, I study the animal in the philosophy of Muslim mystics within the Sufi tradition and the “Illuminationist” tradition. Despite this broad focus, I identify a consistency in the philosophical role of the animal in the mystic tradition. Fundamentally, Islamic philosophers are concerned with reconciling the anthropocentrism of the Qur’ān with the biological reality that humans are animals. These thinkers repeatedly attempt to articulate what distinguishes humans from other animals, thereby justifying their unique place in creation. Of course, philosophical explanations differ. Some Muslim thinkers stress humanity’s rational intellect; others emphasize non-rational intuition. While the supremacy of humankind over God’s creation is a consistent feature in the mystic tradition, these philosophers also discuss animals to teach humility and remind humans to use their position “above” other animals in order to serve all of creation.

⁶ Ibn Bakhṭīshū’, ‘Ubayd Allāh Ibn Jibrā’īl, and Ruiz Bravo, *Libro De Las Utilidades De Los Animales* (Fundación Universitaria Española: Madrid, 1980), xxx. My translation is based on the Latin transcription of David Colville and Spanish interpretation. The Arabic incipit was destroyed; Contadini, 49.



Rhinoceros in Ibn Bukhtishu, Bestiary, Iran, Maragheh, 1297-1298 or 1299-1300, and 19th century MS M.500 fol. 14v. Morgan Library, New York.

Humans as Animals

Like medieval zoologists, Islamic philosophers have accepted that humans are animals since at least the Abbasid era. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Suhrawardī (d. 1191) articulated this fact in their philosophies of logic. Ghazālī explained, “If it is true that all men are animals, then it follows that some animals are men.” Likewise, Suhrawardi used “man is an animal” as an example of a necessary statement, as opposed to a conditional. However, other philosophers

engaged directly with categorization of humans as animals.⁷ Philosophers like Avicenna (d. 1037), al Bīrūnī (d. 1050), and the 10th-century group of Baghdadi mystics known as the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*) crowned human animals atop the Great Chain of Being. Like Aristotle, these scholars conceptualized a hierarchical gradation of earthly beings, from minerals, to plants, to animals, with humans as the “highest” animals. Bīrūnī rationalized the *khalīfa*'s dominion over animals based on humanity's ontological superiority as the culmination of mineral, plant, and animal stages. The Brethren of Purity articulated this gradation of being in their *Risā'il*, wherein they supposed that being improved on the abilities of the former.⁸ They argued that animals share plants' ability to grow, but are distinct in their sentience and locomotion. As animals, humans can move and feel, but are uniquely endowed with a human soul. In the Brethren's cosmology, it is this soul which positions humanity as the link between the animal kingdom and the angels.⁹ Blending zoology and cosmology, they also linked humankind's divine superiority to its unique anatomy as an upright animal whose head points towards heaven, not the earth. The human is therefore the animal closest to God.¹⁰ In similar terms, Avicenna distinguished between the vegetal soul, animal soul, and human soul, which he deemed the *nafs falakīyya*, or heavenly soul. Humankind contained all three natures and is the sole animal capable of attaining the nature of angels, due to the human soul.¹¹ Indeed, this articulation of difference between human and non-human animals has remained common in the Islamic philosophy of the modern period. Mullā Ṣadrā (d. ~1640) claimed this teleological process unfolded in the womb, where human embryos begin as plants, then

⁷ al-Ghazālī and Montgomery W. Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazālī* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1953), 35-6; Yaḥyá Ibn Ḥabash Suhrawardī and John Walbridge, *The Philosophy of Illumination: A New Critical Edition of the Text of Hikmat Al-ishrāq* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 16.

⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', Al-Bīrūnī, and Ibn Sīnā* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 147-150.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

animals, before developing into *ḥayawān bashārī*, or human animals.¹²

Defining Human Nature Against the Animal

Thus, it is the unique “human soul” which distinguishes humans from all other animals. Yet philosophers diverge in defining human nature. Most commonly, mystic thinkers consider the “rational intellect” to be the defining feature of humanity. The Brethren of Purity argued that “reason and discernment” makes humanity unique. For Bīrūnī, it was man’s “intellect, not his superior senses.”¹³ Al-Yūsī (d. 1691) wrote, “man is distinguished from all [animals and other beings] through his possession of superior intellect, by which he perceives universals; reasoned opinion; and independent action.”¹⁴ Similarly, Jāḥiẓ claimed that humans have a unique capacity for *tamkīn* (mastery or empowerment).¹⁵ This capacity includes the control over one’s actions, as well as “reason and understanding.”¹⁶ In this argument, these thinkers emphasize reason (*‘aql*) and self-control in contrast with the non-rational instinctive nature of animals. The Illuminationist, Mullā Ṣadrā, took this further to suppose that one must transcend their animal nature in order to realize their humanity and achieve “Illumination.” Though all human animals were humans in “potentiality,” it was only through transcending animality that one could become an *insān* or “actualized human.” Ṣadrā wrote that humanity could be realized “once the human soul has been awakened and aroused from the state of inanimate sleep, vegetal drowsiness, and animal heedlessness.”¹⁷ In Ṣadrā’s Illuminationist

¹² Mullā Ṣadrā and William C. Chittick, *The Elixir of the Gnostics/Iksīr Al-‘arifīn* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), xxviii

¹³ Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁵ Al-Ḥasan Ibn Mas‘ūd al-Yūsī and Justin Stearns, *The Discourses: Reflections on History, Sufism, Theology, and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 59.

¹⁶ Richard C. Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 72; Jāḥiẓ, 170.

¹⁷ Mullā Ṣadrā and James Winston Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1981), 63.

philosophy, illumination could only be achieved by reaching a state of *ghinā* (“unneedingness” or “disengagement from embodiment”).¹⁸ Thus, *ghinā* might be understood as the disengagement from one’s animal body and physical needs, through human reason and self control.¹⁹ Ṣadrā therefore urged seekers of Illuminationism to “sacrifice your animality so as to seek nearness to God”. Thus, many Islamic philosophers explain humanity’s Godlike perfection by contrasting “animal nature” with the unique self-control and reason of humans.

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However, not all Islamic philosophers credit humanity’s superiority to rationality. Rather, Avicenna claimed that the animal soul controls the brain and the “rational faculties.”²¹ Perhaps then, the human or “heavenly” soul is distinguished by its capacity for non-rational, “intuitive” thought. Indeed, many Islamic philosophers emphasized the importance of both rationality and intuition, particularly within the mystic tradition. Suhrawardī (among Mullā Ṣadrā’s largest influences) claimed that the vicegerent of God must be proficient in both intuitive and discursive philosophy, i.e., spiritual wisdom and rational thought. While Suhrawardī seemingly did not identify either rationality or intuition with animals, he nonetheless identified both forms of intelligence as integral to humanity’s self-realization.²² Still, the Islamic thinkers who pinpoint the difference between humans and animals identify either rationality or intuition as that which sets humans apart. For philosophers like Avicenna or Mullā Ṣadrā, animal nature is something which must be transcended in the realization of human perfection. Humans’ animal nature is either transcended perforce or it must be

¹⁸ Sadra and Chittick, 26.

¹⁹ Ibid., 36.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, 256.

²² Suhrawardī and Walbridge, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, 33, 84.

actively overcome.

Embracing “Animality”

Ibn ‘Arabī’s (d. 1240) *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* provides a lone exception to this doctrine of transcending animal nature. Like most Sufis and Suhrawardī, Ibn ‘Arabī thought that gnosis could only be attained with mastery of both intuition and rational intellect. In *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Ibn ‘Arabī wrote that after the prophet Elias perfected the rational intellect, God instructed him to “descend from the realm of his intellect to that of ... pure animal.” It was in this state of muteness that Elias perfected non-discursive intuition and achieved gnosis, or spiritual union with God. Ibn ‘Arabī himself claimed that “when God established me in this station [of muteness], I realized my animality to the full,” thereby reaching gnosis with God.^{23 27 28} While animality could certainly be interpreted as a mere metaphor for intuition, Ibn ‘Arabī’s emphasis on animality is nonetheless fascinating. In Ibn ‘Arabī’s own Sufi cosmology, gnosis is itself the realization of humanity’s purpose, as seen in his idea of the *insān al-kāmil* or “Perfect Human.” Thus, the philosopher stands alone in that he claimed the realization of one’s humanity as vicegerent does not require humans to reject their animal nature. Instead, the Perfect Human *must* be in touch with their human and *animal* nature. While many other philosophers and mystics have considered both intuition and rationality as necessary to realize one’s humanity, Ibn ‘Arabī was unique in actively promoting this cultivation of animal nature. Even the so-called “eco-theologian,” Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), imputed the ecological crisis to secular modernity which gave “complete freedom to the animal nature within man” and treats him “as a two-legged

²³ Ibn ‘Arabī and R.W.J. Austin, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980), 235.

animal, not an immortal being.”



Double-leaf from the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity, c. 1287, Istanbul, Suleymaniye Library, MSS Esad Efendi. Wendy Shaw in *What is Islamic Art?*

Respect for Animals in Islamic Parables

Affirming the anthropocentrism of Islam and rejecting “animal nature” does not necessarily or generally entail antipathy to animals themselves.²⁴ Even Islamic philosophers who affirmed anthropocentrism and reject “animal nature” repeatedly used animals allegorically to urge humans to respect creation in their role as vicegerent. The most famous example is epistle 22 of the *Risā'il* of the Brethren of Purity, which is known in English as “The Case of the Animals versus Man.” In the epistle, the animals of a mysterious island have the capacity for speech which they use to criticize their mistreatment by human hands. A rabbit accuses

²⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1990), 18, 37.

humans of a “lack of insight” for treating animals kindly until killing them, comparing their actions to violence against one’s own family. Responding to the humans’ claim of intellectual superiority, another animal cautions, “if you had such powerful intellects you would not have boasted over us about things which are not your own doing... but which are among God’s manifold gifts.”²⁵ Through this fable, the Brethren argued that man’s role as vicegerent is contingent on God’s will alone and urged humans not to misuse their divinely ordained intelligence. Going further, another animal claims that “a slight to the work is an affront to its Maker.” It suggests that humans must understand that “animals are the work of the wise Creator.... But this is grasped only by Him and those who are well rooted in knowledge.” Despite the animals’ rhetoric, the Brethren do not suggest the annihilation of anthropocentrism.²⁶ Rather, the epistle ends with a different conclusion — that humans’ dominion is justified by their ability to devote themselves entirely to God’s will, even if few true devotees exist. These true devotees — the perfect vicegerents — would treat animals with “kindness, sympathy, and pity”, not disdain.²⁷ Thus, the *Ikhwān* use animals to urge humans to use their viceregency to care for God’s creation, not for self-centredness. Likewise, humans should remember that their superior qualities and central cosmic role were solely endowed by God.

While the “Case of the Animals versus Man” is certainly the most animated use of animals in Islamic philosophy, the arguments of the *Ikhwān* are not unparalleled. Al-Jāhiz similarly used animals allegorically to argue for humility among Muslims. He cautioned that some animals might seem useless to humans, but they all have a divinely ordained reason for

²⁵ Lenn Evan Goodman and Richard McGregor, *The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn: A Translation from the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 123, 114.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 110

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

existence.²⁸ He wrote, “when you see an animal that is of no help to man...or is downright dangerous... remember that their usefulness lies in their having been sent to try us.” Thus, while he urged humans to be more open-minded, he also reproduced the Qur’ānic idea that animals were created for humans’ use.²⁹ Yet, Jāḥiẓ also emphasized humbleness to even the most insignificant animals, since their actions are guided by God. He recounted the story of a *qāḍī* (judge) who was continually pestered by a fly until he was unable to work. Learning a lesson of submission to God, the *qāḍī* exclaimed, “now I know I am but a weakling, seeing that God’s most feeble creature has vanquished and confounded me!”³⁰ Similarly, Jāḥiẓ admitted that the foolish mind might find ants worthless, “and yet see how God named a valley after them, and made known their wisdom, ... and their humility before the mighty. Then you will see that they are of great value and renown”. In both cases, Jāḥiẓ used such paltry animals to urge Muslims to remain humble despite their status as superior beings.³¹ His religious message was further strengthened by discussing the fly and the ant in similar context to the way they are mentioned in the Qur’ān (22:73 and 27:18, respectively).

²⁸ Jāḥiẓ, 142.

²⁹ Ibid., 153.

³⁰ Ibid., 155.

³¹ Ibid., 172.



Ostrich in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* “Book of Animals” by al-Jāḥiẓ, c. 9th century. Peter Adamson, “Animals in Philosophy of the Islamic World.”

The modern Islamic philosopher Said Nursi also used animals to urge for humility among humans. Humankind, Nursi wrote, is distinguished by its ability to “reach the highest highs and lowest of lows,” at heights beyond angels and depths below animals. Humans are distinguished not just by their capacity for reason, but by their ability to choose their own fate.³² Like Jāḥiẓ, he made extensive use of the animals in the Qur’ān. In fact, Nursi too, used the fly and the ant to urge Muslims to respect animals. In his *Risale*, he defended flies’ right to live, since they have a role within the divine balance of nature. He used non-humans as evidence of God’s immanence, since in God’s intricate and infinite wisdom, an ant can topple

³² Said Nursi, *From the Risale-i Nur Collection: The Letters*, vol I (London: Truostar, 1994), 53.

a pharaoh, or a germ can kill a tyrant.³³ For Nursi, such examples did not detract from humanity's *khalq khuṣuṣ* (special creation), but instead demonstrate the need for humility.³⁴ Uniquely endowed with the ability to choose their own fate, humans ought to choose to respect God's creation and submit to God's will, the very meaning of the word "Islām." While pride denies God's power, "humility is the measure of a man's greatness," he said. Of course, Nursi did not deny that animals are subjected (*musakhkhar*) to humanity.³⁵ In his *Risale*, he cited the verse stating, "He it is Who has made the earth submissive to you, so traverse it in His tracks" (Qur'ān 67:15). Yet, he followed with the verse often recited upon mounting a horse; "Glory be to Him Who has subjected these to us, for we could never have accomplished this" (Qur'ān 43:13). Thus, a worthy vicegerent and true Muslim would not be prideful and oppressive of other animals.³⁶ Rather, in Nursi's view, the *khalīfa* ought to use one's humanity to care for the voiceless, and remember that "wherever you turn, there is the face of God."³⁷

Conclusion

The idea of humility among animals — though found in the philosophy of the Ikhwān and Nursi — is by no means a consistent feature of Islamic thought. Even Muslim thinkers such as Ibn 'Arabī who are concerned primarily with the title of *khalīfa* seldom write on animal ethics. On the other hand, Ibn 'Arabī's radical acceptance of "animal nature," though innovative, also remains unconventional and unparalleled in the Islamic mystical tradition. Still, it remains noteworthy that such scholars rely so heavily on the references to animals in

³³ Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 259

³⁴ Nursi, vol II, 304.

³⁵ Ibid., 259

³⁶ Nursi, vol I, 54.

³⁷ Qur'ān 2:115

the Qur'ān. Of course, many of the Qur'ān's verses are named for animals; the non-human animal holds an undeniable place in Islam. And while the human-animal relationship articulated by Ibn 'Arabī did not integrate into the popular Islamic canon, the conceptions of thinkers like Avicenna, the Brethren, and Jāhiz were integral to zoology up until the modern period. Indeed, following the 9th century translation of Aristotle's *Book of Animals* and the 11th century proliferation of the works of Avicenna, the Brethren, and al-Bīrūnī, the Islamic world entered a "golden age" of zoological works, such as those of al Marwazī (d. ~1125), al-Nuwayrī (d. 1333), al-Damīrī (d. 1405). Even in the 19th and 20th century, Muslims frequently compared Darwin's idea of evolution to the works of Jāhiz and the idea of the "Great Chain of Being."³⁸ Though Islamic philosophers have clashed in their conception of animal nature and the role they allocated animals in their religious worldview, the animal nonetheless occupied a central role in these debates on Islamic cosmology, mysticism, and popular religious guidance. Fundamentally, the animal is repeatedly used as an example through which to understand humanity, whether the question is the nature of human intelligence, or the obligations which humans have to other animals and the greater natural world.

38 See Marwa Elshakry, "Theologies of Nature" in *Reading Darwin in Arabic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2013.

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