

The Animal Fable of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' in Context: The Ontological and Moral Status of Animals in Early Islamic Thought

Undoubtedly the most interesting medieval Arabic text from the perspective of animal ethics is a fable by the 10th-century group of philosophers known by the name of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (The Brethren of Purity).¹ In the fable, animals sue the mankind to court to challenge the latter's claim for the right to subject animals to their servitude.² While the Ikhwān's animal fable is well-known, it has not often been studied from the perspective of animal ethics.³ Nor has it usually been interpreted against the general background of the conception of animal human relations in early Islamic thought. The purpose of this paper is, then, two-fold. First, I will attempt to portray the general conception of the ontological and moral status of animals during the period roughly contemporary to the Ikhwān. Second, I will discuss the Ikhwān's animal fable against this general background. By ontological status I mean the position that animals are thought to occupy within the scale of living beings in comparison to man. In practice, the question reverts primarily to what distinguishes human being from non-human animal species, and whether this distinction is thought to be essential in nature or one of degree. By moral status I mean the kind of value that animals are accorded, in particular, whether they are considered to possess intrinsic value, or merely instrumental value insofar as they benefit human beings. I will argue, first, that the fable's stand on the question of animals can only be assessed after the purpose that the fable serves for its authors is determined, and, second, that this purpose can only be determined within the context of the various genres of animal writing that influence the fable.

¹ For general introductions to the Ikhwān's thought, see Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā')* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Godefroid de Callatay, *Ikhwan al-Safa': A Brotherhood of Idealists on the Fringe of Orthodox Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005); Nader El-Bizri (ed.), *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and their Rasā'il: An Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismā'īlī Studies, 2008).

² The references in this article are to the new critical edition: *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: an Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 22* (ed. and transl. L. E. Goodman and R. McGregor; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismā'īlī Studies, 2009). References to the epistles for which the critical edition is not yet available are to the Beirut edition: *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa-khullān al-wafā'* (ed. B. al-Bustānī; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957).

³ See, however, two recent articles: Sarra Tlili, "All Animals are Equal, or Are They? The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's Animal Epistle and its Unhappy End," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 16.2 (2014): 42-88; Peter Adamson, "The Ethical Treatment of Animals," in R. C. Taylor and L. Xavier López-Farjeat (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Routledge; 2016), pp. 371-82. Adamson discusses the Ikhwān's animal ethics alongside Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and Ibn Ṭufayl. I have previously discussed the same three philosophers together with the poet al-Ma'arrī in a Finnish-language article: "Eläinten kohtelun etiikkaa keskiajan arabialaisessa filosofiassa," *Marhaba: Suomalais-arabialaisen yhdistyksen vuosikirja* (2009), pp. 50-9.

Status of animals in early Islamic thought

Animals appear prominently in various literary genres of the classical period, many of which are relevant for the Ikhwān's fable.⁴ First, animals are discussed in the Islamic religious sources, the Quran and *ḥadīth*, and within the religious sciences of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalām*). Second, there is the genre of animal fables themselves in which, arguably, the subject matter is related more to the human than the animal sphere in the sense that animals are employed as a narrative device to represent the human world. Third, there is the properly zoological genre of writing where animals are discussed for their own sake.

For most Islamic thinkers, the Quranic conception of animals is of obvious importance. The Quran contains many passages referring to either animals in general or to particular animal species. As in many other questions, there is, however, no simple Quranic position on animals, but, when taken as a whole, the Quran rather appears to present an ambivalent position. Some passages state more or less explicitly that animals are subordinate to human beings. Human beings are the God's "viceregents in the earth" (*khalīfat Allāh*) (6:165), and hence represent the summit within a hierarchical order of creation, while animals are subjected to their service (22:65). Animals possess merely instrumental value in form of the benefits they provide for the mankind (6:142; 16:5). Other Quranic passages, however, present a different picture. Animals, birds and ants in particular, are said to possess speech (27:16-18), and all animals are said to worship God in their own ways (17:44; 24:41): "Do you not see that all beings in the heavens and on earth praise God, and the birds with wings outspread in flight? Each one knows its own way of prayer and praise." Verse 11:6, cited innumerable times in the Ikhwān's fable, extends God's providence to all animals: "And there is no animal on earth that does not receive sustenance from God. He knows its dwelling and resting place." The most eloquent attribution of what would seem to be intrinsic value to animals emerges in passage 6:38: "And there is no animal that walks upon the earth nor a bird that flies with its two wings but they are nations (*umam*) like yourself." The continuation of the passage even indicates the possibility of animal afterlife: "then to their Lord shall they be gathered."

The Quran, then, contains both passages in which animals possess value only insofar as they benefit human beings, and passages that seem to suggest that animals are intrinsically valuable independent of their utility. This of course makes it possible to cite the Quranic authority to support both views, as is evident in the Ikhwān's animal trial where the human beings cite the former and the animals the latter kind of passages to support their case.⁵ The voluminous *ḥadīth* corpus is even less uniform, but it does contain traditions encouraging clemency to animals, forbidding the killing of specific species, discouraging hunting for sport, or accounts where the prophets or Shī'ite imams are said to understand the language of animals.⁶ Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which is founded on these two primary sources, contains a great number of

⁴ The best general survey of the Islamic conception of animals at the moment is Richard C. Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures* (Oxford: Oneworld; 2006) which ranges from the classical to the contemporary period.

⁵ The Quran and *ḥadīth* have also been employed more recently to argue for an Islamic animal ethics, as in Al-Hafiz Basheer Ahmad Masri, *Animal Welfare in Islam* (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation; 2007).

⁶ See Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition*, pp. 17-25.

regulations concerning animals, such as dietary regulations in particular. For the most part, however, such regulations approach animals as human possessions, even if there are also occasional legal treatises recommending the good treatment of animals.⁷ Finally, within the sphere of Muslim speculative theology (*kalām*), some Mu‘tazilite theologians believed that animals would be compensated for their suffering in this world in the afterlife.⁸ However, while the Ikhwān’s fable cites Quran extensively, Prophetic *ḥadīths* are cited rarely, and Imamic not all, despite the Ikhwān’s Shī‘ite sympathies. Also, the discussions of animals in either *fiqh* or Mu‘tazilite *kalām* seem to play no particular role – although Mu‘tazilite influences have sometimes been attributed to the Ikhwān, the fable explicitly states that animals are *not* subject to judgment in the afterlife.⁹

Besides the religious tradition, animals obviously appear prominently in animal fables, and these clearly represent an inspiration for the Ikhwān’s own fable. The most famous of these is Ibn al-Muqaffa’s (d. ca. 758) allegorical story about two shackal brothers, *Kalīla and Dimna* (*Kalīla wa-Dimna*), which goes back to a Sanskrit story via a 6th-century translation into Middle Persian, and even includes a trial between animals.¹⁰ Since the Ikhwān possibly adopted their pen name from the story,¹¹ and the story is explicitly mentioned in the fable,¹² it seems probable that *Kalīla and Dimna* acted as an inspiration for their own fable where animals also talk and act like human beings. There is also a further genre of philosophical and mystical animal fables – such as Avicenna’s (d. 1037) *Epistle of the Birds* (*Risālat al-Ṭayr*) or ‘Aṭṭār’s (d. 1229) *Conference of the Birds* (*Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*).¹³ In all of these fables, the subject matter is not so much the animal but the human world, as the animals represent human virtues and vices, or symbolize mystical or philosophical ideas, such as the rational soul’s ascent from the material to the spiritual world in the case of Avicenna. Despite the probable influence of such animal fables on the Ikhwān, and even if their fable also might have a metaphorical level, unlike Ibn al-Muqaffa or Avicenna, the Ikhwān are not merely employing animals as a literary device, but explicitly state that they aim to inform the reader about the animal world.

A third genre where animals appear prominently is the properly zoological literature which comes closest to a scientific enquiry on animals in the modern sense. Within the zoological literature, one may further distinguish between a literary or popular strand, exemplified by al-Jāhīz’s (d. ca. 868) multi-volume *Book of the*

⁷ Ibid, pp. 29-46.

⁸ See Margaretha T. Heemskerk, *Suffering in the Mu‘tazilite Theology* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne: Brill; 2000), pp. 187-9.

⁹ *The Case of the Animals*, p. 276. See, however, the discussion of the Ikhwān’s advocacy of the doctrine of reincarnation below, which means that the animals do have an afterlife after all, although not in the Mu‘tazilite sense.

¹⁰ For *Kalīla and Dimna* in the context of Arabic animal fables, see Robert Irwin, “The Arabic Beast Fable,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 55 (1992): 36-50.

¹¹ Cf. Nader El-Bizri, “Prologue,” in El-Bizri (ed.), *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, pp. 1-32, at p. 1.

¹² *The Case of the Animals*, p. 95.

¹³ For ‘Aṭṭār’s bird fable, see the articles in Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackle (eds.), *‘Aṭṭār and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight* (London: I. B. Tauris; 2006), and for Avicenna’s philosophical stories, see Henry Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire: Etude sur le cycle des récits visionnaires* (Paris: Berg; 1979); Sarah Stroumsa, “Avicenna’s Philosophical Stories: Aristotle’s *Poetics* Reinterpreted,” *Arabica*, 39.2 (1992): 183-206.

Animals (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*),¹⁴ and a philosophical strand founded on Aristotelian zoology. Although al-Jāhiz also draws on Aristotle, his treatise is not a work of systematic zoology in the Aristotelian sense, but he approaches the subject more from a literate (*adab*) perspective. In the Arabic philosophical tradition (*falsafa*), zoology formed an integral part of the Aristotelian curriculum as one of the physical sciences. The three major works of Aristotle's zoological corpus, *History of Animals*, *Parts of Animals*, and *Generation of Animals*, were known in Arabic as a single work, *The Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*), translated in the 9th century.¹⁵

Of these, the *History of Animals* enjoyed the widest impact, transcending the disciplinary line between philosophy and literature. This is because of the somewhat anecdotal nature of the work which consists of a description of around 500 animal kinds and their characteristics, and makes it open-ended in the sense that new descriptions and species could easily be inserted by the author according to his own observations or second-hand knowledge. The *History of Animals*, then, presumably formed the “raw data” to which the scientific method of enquiry outlined in the *Posterior Analytics* could be applied, while the two other works presented Aristotle's causal explanation of animal anatomy and reproduction respectively within a teleological framework.¹⁶ The investigation of animals, then, served the further purpose of inferring general principles operating in nature – in the *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle famously justifies the inclusion of animals as an object of study by the fact that, due to their nearness, human beings have better access to knowledge about animals than about the revolving spheres in the sky.¹⁷

The Arabic Aristotelians do not appear to have shared Aristotle's enthusiasm on the empirically founded enquiry of animals, as zoology enjoys a rather non-prominent position within the Arabic Aristotelian sciences. The main interest of the Arabic philosophers in zoology seems to lie in animal, and by extension human, anatomy, and the general principles operating in nature to be inferred from the study of animals. Ibn Bājja (d. 1139) and Averroes (d. 1192) wrote commentaries on the *Book of Animals*, and the 8th *faṣl* of the physical part of Avicenna's major Aristotelian summa,

¹⁴ Cf. M. V. McDonald, “Animal-Books as a Genre in Arabic Literature,” *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, 15.1/2 (1988): 3-10. Another example of the non-philosophical genre of zoology would be al-Marwāzī's (fl. 11th-12th cent.) *The Natures of Animals* (*Ṭabā'i' al-ḥayawān*) for which see Albert Z. Iskandar, “A Doctor's Book on Zoology: al-Marwāzī's *Ṭabā'i' al-ḥayawān* (*Nature of Animals*)”, *Oriens*, 27/28 (1981): 266-312.

¹⁵ The two shorter works *On Animal Motion* and *On Animal Locomotion* were probably not translated. The Arabic translation has been edited in: Aristotle, *Generation of Animals: The Arabic Translation Commonly Ascribed to Yaḥyā Ibn Bīṭrīq*, eds. J. Brugman and H. J. Drossaart Lulofs (Leiden: Brill, 1971); Idem, *The Arabic Version of Aristotle's Parts of Animals: Book XI-XIV of the Kitāb al-Ḥayawān, a Critical Edition with Introduction and Selected Glossary*, ed. R. Kruk (Amsterdam and Oxford: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1979); Idem, *Historia Animalium of Aristotle: The Arabic Version of Book I-X of the Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, eds. L. S. Filius and J. N. Mattock (Leiden: E. J. Brill, forthcoming). For the Arabic transmission of Aristotelian zoology, see *The Arabic Version of Aristotle's Parts of Animals*, pp. 8-45; Remke Kruk, “La zoologie aristotélicienne: Tradition arabe,” in R. Goulet (ed.), *Dictionnaire des Philosophes Antiques: supplément* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2003), pp. 329-34.

¹⁶ Cf. James Lennox, “Aristotle's Biology,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-biology>) (2007).

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, 645a4ff.

The Healing (al-Shifā'), is devoted to zoology.¹⁸ Avicenna, in general, follows the three Aristotelian zoological works, but rearranges and expands on the material according to his own interests, and complements the *History of Animals* with his own observations and second-hand reports.¹⁹ In addition, he “modernizes” the systematic part corresponding to PA and GA with Galen’s (d. ca. 216) more “up-to-date” information on animal anatomy which he as an eminent theoretician and practitioner of medicine was highly familiar with.²⁰ For Avicenna also, the study of animals in part aims to highlight the efficient and final causality in nature that the animals manifest, pointing in the end to the divine providence behind them, which, in Avicenna’s case, operates by the intermediacy of secondary causality, that is, through natural, universal, and rational principles.

Given the theoretical nature of Avicenna’s zoology, the metaquestions concerning the animal-human relations do not really arise. However, like Aristotle, Avicenna in his zoological observations accords animals some degree of higher cognitive functions, including the capacity to remember, to learn from experience, and even prudential planning of some sort. For the question of the status of animals, Aristotle’s *On the Soul (De Anima)* is, however, arguably more important in that it presents a hierarchical view of life, ascending gradually from the life-preserving functions present even in the simplest of plants up to the rationality present only in human being. This means, first of all, that there is a sharp distinction between the human beings and irrational animals. But it also means that animals share with the human being all subrational psychical faculties, including the capacity to feel pain and pleasure, as well as imagination which for Aristotle functions as a bridge between sense perception and conceptual thought.

With the possible exception of Averroes, none of the Arabic philosophers, and certainly not the Ikhwān,²¹ were orthodox Aristotelians in *all* areas of philosophy. Most of them adopted Neoplatonic emanationist cosmology and eschatology from treatises such as the *Theology of Aristotle* and *On the Pure Good*, paraphrasing parts of Plotinus’ (d. 270) *Enneads* and Proclus’ (d. 485) *Elements of Theology* respectively.²² These treatises entailed a hierarchical view of the downwards progression of being from the first principle downwards, where the hierarchy of existence is also a normative one, that is, the higher rank in the scale of beings entails higher value. While Neoplatonic thought does involve a dualistic distinction between rational human beings and irrational animals, despite this, many Platonists accorded a

¹⁸ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Shifā': Al-Ṭabī'īyyāt: Al-Ḥayawān 1-8*, ed. I. Madkour (Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Ta'līf wa-l-Naṣh, 1970).

¹⁹ See Basim Musallam, “Avicenna: §X, Medicine and Biology,” in E. Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 3 (Boston: Routledge and Kegan, 1989), pp. 94-9; Remke Kruk, “Ibn Sīnā on Animals: Between the First Teacher and the Physician,” in J. Janssens and D. De Smet (eds.), *Avicenna and His Heritage: Acts of the International Colloquium, Leuven-Louvain-La-Neuve, September 8 - September 11, 1999* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), pp. 325-41.

²⁰ According to Musallam, “Avicenna,” in the latter parts Avicenna substitutes much of the Aristotelian material with borrowings from his own medical masterwork *Canon on Medicine (Al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb)*.

²¹ For the various ancient and contemporary philosophical and religious sources employed by the highly eclectic Ikhwān, see de Callatāy, *Ikhwan al-Safa'*, pp. 73–88.

²² For the Arabic transmission of Greek Neoplatonism, see Cristina D’Ancona, “Greek into Arabic: Neoplatonism in Translation,” in P. Adamson and R. C. Taylor (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 10-31.

relatively high value to non-human animals. Partly this was due to the Platonic idea of reincarnation which was also adopted by some Arabic philosophers and theologians, including the Platonically oriented Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925) and, it would seem, the Ikhwān. Moreover, the Platonic author Plutarch (d. ca. 120) and Plotinus' pupil Porphyry (d. ca. 305) wrote treatises arguing against killing animals for food or sacrifice.²³ Aristotle's disciple Theophrastus (d. 288 BCE), although not a Platonist, also differed from his master's views on the moral status of animals.²⁴ All three of these authors were known to Arabic philosophers, but there is no evidence that any of the relevant treatises would have been translated into Arabic.²⁵

In sum, most Arabic philosophers adopted an Aristotelian-Neoplatonic conception of a hierarchy of life within which human being is distinguished from other animal species by his possession of reason – he is the ‘speaking’ or ‘reasoning’ animal (*zō'on logistikon/al-ḥayawān al-nāṭiq*).²⁶ The duality is not quite as simple as this, however. As Avicenna in his zoological writings, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 925) also attributes some level of rationality to animals.²⁷ The question whether or not animals possess language was discussed already in antiquity, and al-Fārābī believes that some non-human animals possess a lower form of non-conceptual speech.²⁸ Avicenna's famous estimative faculty (Ar. *wahm*/Lat. *estimatio*) also pertains to animals which means that they possess some level of abstract, even if not conceptual, thought.²⁹ Namely, the estimative faculty applies non-sensory intentions (*ma'ānī*) to sense objects – Avicenna's favourite example is a sheep ‘perceiving’ the wolf as a threat – and hence lies at a higher level of abstraction than the Aristotelian faculty of imagination. Due to the centrality of self-awareness in Avicennian psychology, Avicenna also appears to attribute a level of self-consciousness to animals: “Every animal knows itself and perceives its soul/self as one soul (*yastash'ir nafsahu nafsan wāḥida*) that orders and rules the body that it has.”³⁰

²³ For Porphyry, see the introduction and notes in the edition of Porphyry, *Porphyre de l'abstinence*, 3 vols., eds. J. Bouffartigue and M. Patillon (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1977), and for classical animal ethical debates in general, see Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

²⁴ See William W. Fortenbaugh, *Theophrastean Studies* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003), pp. 173-94.

²⁵ For the Arabic knowledge of Theophrastus, see Dimitri Gutas, “The Life, Work, and Sayings of Theophrastus in the Arabic Tradition,” in W. W. Fortenbaugh, P. M. Huby and A. A. Long (eds.), *Theophrastus of Eresus On His Life and Work*, (New Brunswick, NH: Transaction Books, 1985).

²⁶ The Arabic translation of the cognates of *logos* with the root n-ṭ-q preserves the original dual meaning, that is, *nāṭiq* can be rendered either as ‘speaking’ or ‘rational.’

²⁷ That al-Rāzī attributes a high level of rationality to animals is maintained in Thérèse-Anne Druart, “Al-Rāzī's Conception of the Soul: Psychological Background to his Ethics,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 5 (1996): 245–263. Peter Adamson, “Abū Bakr al-Rāzī on Animals,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 94.3 (2012): 249-73, however, argues contra Druart that animals do not possess rational soul.

²⁸ See Thérèse-Anne Druart, “Logic and Language,” in *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 75-6.

²⁹ For the estimative faculty, see Deborah L. Black, “Estimation (*wahm*) in Avicenna: The Logical and Psychological Dimensions,” *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, 32.2 (1993): 219-58.

³⁰ The passage is quoted in Luis Xavier López-Farjeat, “Self-Awareness (*al-shu'ūr bi-l-dhāt*) in Human and Non-Human Animals in Avicenna's Psychological Writings,” in A. G. Vigo (ed.), *Oikeiosis and the Natural Bases of Morality: From Classical Stoicism to Modern Philosophy* (Hildesheim, Zurich and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2012), pp. 121-40.

Even if the rationality-irrationality distinction may be more blurred than it initially seems, this has no consequence for the moral status of animals. Despite the high cognitive capabilities sometimes attributed to animals by al-Fārābī and Avicenna, neither of them draws any ethical conclusions concerning human-animal relations. There are, however, a few authors who do raise ethical questions concerning animals. In his ethical treatise *The Philosophical Life* (*Kitāb al-sīra al-falsafiyya*), al-Rāzī argues for the extension of justice to the treatment of animals based on their capacity to feel pain, disapproves hunting for sport, and recommends killing herbivore animals as little as possible – the latter is allowed only on the ground that their souls may be reincarnated in a human body after their death.³¹ The blind Syrian poet al-Ma‘arrī (d. 1057) advocates abstention from all animal products on similar grounds of avoiding inflicting pain or suffering to any sentient being.³² The Andalusian philosopher Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), in his philosophical fable *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, has his protagonist abstaining from killing not only animals but, if possible, also plants when he realizes the intrinsic value that all living beings possess in that each of them strives to develop towards its own particular end or perfection.³³ Adamson has recently emphasized that the intrinsic value accorded to animals by al-Rāzī and Ibn Ṭufayl is ultimately derived from divine providence.³⁴ Consequently, in contrast to arguments developed by both Greek Platonism and contemporary animal ethics, the high cognitive capabilities of animals have no bearing on their moral status. However, even if the question of the rationality of animals is in the end secondary for their moral status, for both al-Rāzī and al-Ma‘arrī, as for animal ethics today, the fundamental ground why animals should be treated in an ethical way is that they are capable of feeling pain. This, as we will see, is also the case for the Ikhwān. That animals have such capability is of course part of standard Aristotelian psychology, even if only very few of the Arabic Aristotelians are concerned with its ethical implications.

Status of animals in the *Case of the Animals*

The fable about a trial between animals and human beings is by far the lengthiest, and certainly the most extraordinary, text related to animal ethics within classical Arabic literature. It was written by an anonymous group of philosophers who called

³¹ Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, *Rasā'il falsafiyya* (*Opera philosophica*), ed. P. Kraus (Cairo, 1939), pp. 103-5. Al-Rāzī's argument is, however, somewhat complicated. Since predatory animals cause suffering to other animals, their slaughter is allowed by the fact that the overall suffering to which animals are subjected is reduced as a result. The only ground justifying the killing of herbivore animals is that "the souls are not liberated from any of the animal bodies, but only from the human body. Since this is the case, liberating such souls from their bodies is similar to facilitating their rescue (*khalāṣ*). Since in the animals that only eat meat these two grounds are combined, they should be killed as much as possible, both to reduce the pain of animals and in the hope that their souls may come to better bodies." For me, as for most scholars, the passage refers to reincarnation, a doctrine which later Arabic authors also attributed to al-Rāzī. Recently, Adamson, "Al-Rāzī on Animals," pp. 264ff., has suggested, however, that the reference is not to reincarnation, but to resurrection of animal bodies in the afterlife.

³² D. S. Margoliouth, "Abū l-'Alā al-Ma'arrī's Correspondence on Vegetarianism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1902): 289-332.

³³ Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy Ben Yaqdhān: Roman philosophique d'Ibn Thofail*, ed. L. Gauthier (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1936). The three-grade diet developed by Ḥayy, progressing from eating only fruit through uprooting plants up to killing even animals if his survival requires it, is reminiscent of Threophrastus and Porphyry to the degree that one has to wonder whether the relevant treatises of one or another of these authors was known in Arabic after all, even if only indirectly.

³⁴ Adamson, "The Ethical Treatment of Animals."

themselves the “Brethren of Purity and Friends of Loyalty” (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ wa-Khullān al-Wafā’). It forms the best-known part of the Ikhwān’s encyclopedia of philosophical sciences which in totality consists of 52 epistles (*rasā’il*) ranging from mathematics and logic, through natural philosophy, to theology and the religious sciences. Although the question of the dating of the *Epistles* is complicated and much debated, its final redaction, which may have started already in the 9th century, is most commonly dated to the second half of the 10th century.³⁵ The animal fable is situated among the physical epistles, within the 22nd epistle devoted to zoology, following an epistle on botany. The story is preceded by an introduction which approaches the subject matter through a more systematic method.

The fable itself starts all the way at the beginning of creation, where we are told that all human beings were vegetarians at first until they started to hunt animals for food and subjugate them to their service.³⁶ The main plot gets going once a ship full of men of all professions and ethnicities is shipwrecked at an island governed by a wise and just king of the *jinn*s. As the men begin to subjugate the animals of the island to their servitude, the animals take the case to the court of the king, challenging the human claim that the superiority of human beings justifies their employment of animals to their benefit. Before the actual trial, there is a lengthy interlude (chapters 11-18) in which each of the seven major animal kinds chooses their representative for the trial. In the trial itself, as the main focus point of the debate emerges the question whether there is some specific feature that makes human beings superior to all other animal species, and therefore makes the subjugation of the latter legitimate. The premiss of the story would, then, appear to be that the ontological status of the animals determines their moral status. That is, the Ikhwān seem to be asking the strikingly modern question of what distinguishes the human being from other animal species, and whether this difference is sufficient to justify the human subjugation of other animals. As such, the fable is highly interesting from the perspective of contemporary animal ethical discussions which often revolve around this question.

In the beginning of the trial, a distinction is made between arguments based on tradition and religion (*dalā’il sam’iyya shar’iyya*) and arguments based on reason (*hujaj ‘aqliyya*),³⁷ both of which are employed in the course of the trial. As regards the first, the animal and human representatives both cite those Quranic passages that support their position, and, as we have seen, the Quran can be employed to argue for both points of view. The frequency of Quranic citations in the fable seems to show the importance that the Quranic conception of animals has for the authors. The passage in which God’s providence is extended to animals (11:6) is cited particularly frequently, reaffirming the view that divine providence is one the central themes that the Ikhwān want to highlight with their fable. However, even if the authors outside the fable

³⁵ For recent summaries of the interrelated questions of the authorship and dating of the *Epistles*, see Godefroid de Callataÿ, “Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’),” in K. Fleet et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three, Part 2013-14* (Leyden and Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 84-90 and Carmela Baffioni, “Ikhwān al-Safā’”, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ikhwan-al-safa/>) (2016).

³⁶ *The Case of the Animals*, p. 38.

³⁷ *The Case of the Animals*, p. 42.

adhere to the Quranic view of human being as “God’s viceregent on earth,”³⁸ in the fable the trial is not decided by scriptural authority.

A major part of the fable is rather focused on the “rational arguments” presented in the trial. The presentation of the fable usually follows the pattern in which one of the human representatives claims that human being alone possesses a particular virtuous trait, after which the animal representatives show either that the particular trait is not unique to human beings or that it is not virtuous at all. Until the very end of the trial, all of these debates end in the failure of the human representatives to prove their claim. The fable, then, seems to say that social organization, arts and crafts, or even language, for example, do not distinguish human beings from other animals, as these are present in some form in one animal kind or another.³⁹ As we have seen, the Ikhwān are firmly within the Arabic zoological tradition in saying that higher cognitive functions could be attributed to the non-human animals.

The second animal strategy is to deny that even if particular human characteristics, such as many aspects of civilization, sciences and philosophy, or organized religion, were unique to human beings, they do not attest to their higher virtue.⁴⁰ Thus, animals have no need for the luxuries of human civilization, such as the different kinds of clothing, dishes, or beverages, because they are able to fulfil their needs by simpler means, nor the rites of worship prescribed for human beings since they worship God by nature, and dispense of philosophy which only leads to skepticism concerning the truth. The fable, then, claims that animals are virtuous by nature in that they automatically fulfil the divine purposes in their actions, whereas human beings in most cases are diverted from them. Much of the fable, then, contrasts human vice with animal virtue. The Ikhwān’s purpose in this, however, is to criticize the majority of human kind engrossed in vice and ignorance, rather than claim that animals would possess equal, let alone higher, value than human beings.

In the fable, this is shown in the almost unsatisfactorily abrupt ending in which the presence of prophets, imams, saints, and sages among human beings finally convinces all parties of the trial of human superiority.⁴¹ The point seems to be that their most virtuous and wise specimens demonstrate that human being as a species has higher potential for virtue and knowledge, and hence a higher value, than any other species, whether or not most people attain any of it. In the end, as we will see, the view of the fable accords with that of the *Epistles* as a whole, that is, human beings have the right to employ other animals for their benefit because they lie higher within the hierarchy of existence. Despite this, the fable also attributes intrinsic, non-instrumental value to other animal species by emphasizing the ways in which each of them pursues its own providential purposes. This value is, however, wholly independent of the question whether animals are similar to human beings cognitively as, in the fable, the same providential purposefulness is ascribed to all animals from the lowest insects to the highest mammals. Hence, this cannot be the only ground on which the Ikhwān’s ethical concern with the treatment of animals is founded, for if this were the case, the sphere of morality should be extended to plants, as Ibn Ṭufayl indeed did.

³⁸ See below.

³⁹ *The Case of the Animals*, pp. 183-90 (social organization), 229-33 (arts and crafts), 235 (language)

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-202 (civilization), 203-8 (religion), 246-9 (sciences).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-8.

Before the fable's real stance on the status of animals can be assessed, however, one should first determine what purpose the story serves for its authors. Namely, if it is meant as an allegory, in the vein of *Kalīla and Dimna*, clearly its message cannot be taken literally. An essential question concerning the fable, then, is why did the authors decide to discuss zoology in form a story, rather than by means of a more straightforward exposition based on Aristotelian zoology, as Avicenna did in his own philosophical *summa*. Although the animal fable is not the only story in the *Epistles*, it is by far the lengthiest. In other cases the Ikhwān employ allegorical stories to illustrate an idea, but the animal fable constitutes most of the 22nd epistle, dwarfing in comparison the introduction that precedes it. Zoology is, then, the only subject for which the authors considered a phantastical story to constitute the most appropriate manner of presentation.

Fortunately, the Ikhwān provide a rather explicit answer to their objectives in the introduction:

We have also shown in more than one of our epistles the virtue of the human being, his praiseworthy qualities, and pleasing character traits, his true forms of knowledge, wise arts, virtuous modes of governance, and lordly forms of rule. In this epistle, we wish to explain some of the virtues, praiseworthy qualities, pleasing natures, and sound dispositions of the animals. We also wish to show something of the tyranny and injustice of the human being, his transgression over those other beings among the livestock and animals in general that he has subjected to his service, and his ungratefulness to the blessings and heedlessness to what he should be thankful for. For human being, when he is virtuous and good, is a noble angel and the best of the created beings. But when he is vicious, he is an accursed demon, the worst of the created beings. We have explained this through the tongues of animals so that it would be more emphatic in its lesson (*maw'iza*), more eloquent in its discourse, more wondrous in its account, more curious to hear and more provoking to think, and more excellent in its lesson.⁴²

The passage reveals several things about the Ikhwān's purpose. First, unlike for many other Arabic and Persian animal fables, the subject matter of their fable is at least partly animals, rather than animals symbolizing human beings. Second, the ethical problem concerning the treatment of animals transmitted in the story is a genuine concern for the Ikhwān, not just a literary trope. Third, like the other stories employed by the Ikhwān in their *Epistles*, the story is meant to carry a moral message. Fourth, the authors chose a fable as their form of exposition because it conveys their message in a more vivid and entertaining fashion. One could further surmise that the authors' familiarity with animal fables of ultimately Indian origin was too tempting for them *not* to present zoology in the form of one.

When the fable is taken as a whole, and as suggested by the passage cited above, it seems clear that the story in fact serves many parallel purposes for the authors, reflecting the various literary genres concerned with animals discussed above. It is zoology in the form of an animal fable – in course of the story the Ikhwān present their classification of the seven major animal kinds and describe the behaviour and characteristics of a great number of animal species. In particular, the main purpose of the interlude, in which the seven animal kinds choose their representative for the trial, would seem to be to present the Ikhwān's classification of animal species. Despite its peculiar form, the Ikhwān's 22nd epistle on zoology is, then, firmly situated within the

⁴² *The Case of the Animals*, pp. 4-5 [my translation].

context of the Arabic Aristotelian zoological tradition. As for both al-Jāhiz and Avicenna, the investigation of animals also serves the further purpose of revealing the divine wisdom and providence to which they owe their existence – the theme of the multifarious ways in which divine mercy manifests itself in the constitution of animals from the smallest insects to the largest mammals goes through the fable.

The fable is also a morality tale in which the moral message relates, first, to the suffering that the mankind inflicts on animals, making the Ikhwān one of the rare, although, as we have seen, not unique, advocates of animal rights in the classical Islamic world. Beyond animal ethics, however, the moral message is related to the general critique of humanity permeating the *Epistles* – the majority of human beings have transgressed their proper boundaries and chosen evil instead of good. Throughout the fable, the animals decry the failings of the human kind which is contrasted with the natural virtuousness of the animals.

Finally, there is the possibility that the story also carries an allegorical meaning superimposed on its more literal reading. It seems that the suffering of animals at the hands of human beings symbolizes for the authors the suffering of virtuous believers at the hands of human tyrants.⁴³ The Ikhwān divide human history into seven cycles, each of which is initiated by a prophet bringing an exoteric religious law, followed by imams upholding its esoteric interpretation.⁴⁴ The animal kinds are also seven in number, and it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that each of them represents a prophetic nation, their king the prophet, and the envoys sent to the trial the imams. If this interpretation is correct, the wise king of the *jinn*s arbitrating between humans and animals would represent God. But even if the story did carry an allegorical level, the surface meaning of the story is still related to animals, as the Ikhwān themselves declare in the introduction.

The animal fable must further be related to the conception of animals in its introduction, as well as in the *Epistles* as a whole.⁴⁵ In both the introduction and the *Epistles* in general, the Ikhwān subscribe to the standard Aristotelian and Neoplatonic view that life forms constitute a gradually ascending hierarchy down from minerals, through plant and animal species, up to the human being, so that “the highest animals verge with the lowest rank of human beings, and the highest rank of humans with the lowest of the angels.”⁴⁶ The human being is distinguished from other animals by his

⁴³ An esoteric reading of the fable is suggested in Shlomo Pines, “Shī‘ite Terms and Conceptions in Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 2 (1980): 165-251, at 185-9. Also, as noted in Ehud Krinis, “Al-Risāla al-Jāmi‘a and Its Judeo-Arabic Manuscript,” in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Islam: Identité et altérité: Hommage à Guy Monnot* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 311-29, at pp. 314-5, the *Comprehensive Epistle* (*Al-Risāla al-Jāmi‘a*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib, Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1974, pp. 200-2) identifies the obedient animals with “descendants of the prophets” (*dhurriyat al-nubuwwa*) and their followers who are subjected to the rule of “tyrants” (*jabābira*), suggesting an essentially Shī‘ite interpretation for the fable. The *Comprehensive Epistle* is a lengthy summary of the *Epistles* which promises to reveal the esoteric meanings hinted at in the individual epistles. While it is usually attributed to the same authors, systematic studies on the precise relation of the two works are still lacking.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Rasā’il*, III (42), pp. 486-8. The doctrine of seven prophetic cycles is characteristic of the Ismā‘īlite brand of Shī‘ism. While it is beyond doubt that Ismā‘īlī thought is a major influence on the Ikhwān, there is no scholarly consensus on whether the Ikhwān in fact were Ismā‘īlīs.

⁴⁵ The stance on animals of the fable and its introduction seem to present a contradiction, as noted, for example, in Adamson, “The Ethical Treatments of Animals,” pp. 375-6.

⁴⁶ *The Case of Animals*, p. 4.

possession of reason/speech (*nutq*) and discernment (*tamyīz*). For the Ikhwān, the progression is also temporal, the plants were created before animals, the more deficient animals before the more perfect ones, and the human being as last.⁴⁷ According to the Ikhwān, this is because what precedes something else in time exists for the sake of that thing, meaning that plants exist for the sake of animals, and animals for the sake of human being.⁴⁸ The relation of the human form to the forms of the other animals species is, then, like the relation of the “head to the body,” and the “human soul is like the governor and the animal souls like those governed.” The Ikhwān also cite the Quranic passage about human being as “God’s viceregent on earth.”⁴⁹

Clearly, then, the fact that human being as a species is superior to other animals is a given for the Ikhwān, founded on Aristotelian psychology, Neoplatonic cosmology, and Quranic authority. The debate of the animal trial on whether or not human beings are superior to other animals does not therefore seem to represent a genuine problem for the Ikhwān. It would instead appear to be a literary device which allows the Ikhwān to convey zoological lore, highlight divine providence, and put criticism of the human kind into the mouths of the animals. However, since the conclusion of the trial in the end favors the human position, and coincides with the Ikhwān’s actual view, the contradiction between the two accounts is one of presentation rather than of doctrine.

The fact that human beings are both ontologically and morally superior to other animals is of course agreed upon by all Arabic philosophers, including the ones, such as al-Rāzī and Ibn Ṭufayl, who accord some degree of intrinsic value to non-human animals. Hence, it does not at all imply that the Ikhwān’s ethical concern for the unjust treatment of animals is ungentle, especially since such concern is explicitly expressed in the introduction. Still, it is remarkable that any animal ethical point of view is conspicuously absent in most of the other 51 epistles. There are, however, at least two passages in which the Ikhwān passingly refer to the question of the moral status of animals.

In the 40th epistle, the Ikhwān raise the question of how the fact that animals eat each other for survival, and are thereby subjected to pain and suffering, can be fitted together with divine providence.⁵⁰ The Ikhwān’s answer is that the wisdom behind the hierarchy of life entails that the lower life forms serve the higher ones, so that plants serve as nourishment for animals, and animals for each other, while the animal capability to feel pain is necessary for them to avoid things that are harmful to their well-being. From this, the Ikhwān conclude that reason forbids human beings to eat animals when it subjects them to pain and suffering upon their slaughter, although otherwise it is permitted, just as animals are permitted to eat plants because plants do not feel pain.⁵¹ It seems clear, then, that the Ikhwān’s ethical concern over the human

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 6-8.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: Sciences of the Soul and Intellect, Part III: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 39-41* (ed. and transl. C. Baffioni and K. Poonawala; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismā‘īlī Studies, 2017), pp. 117-35.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 126.

treatment of animals is, as for al-Rāzī and al-Ma‘arrī, above all due to the animal capability to feel pain. In the fifth epistle, however, the Ikhwān give a different answer why slaughtering sacrificial animals was allowed by the prophetic legislators (*wāḍi‘ū al-nawāmīs*):

Similar is also the fate of the souls of the animals after slaughter, for you must not suppose, ‘o brother, that the goal of the legislators (*wāḍi‘ū al-nawāmīs*) in allowing the slaughter of animals in temples for rites of sacrifice (*qarābīn*) was to allow eating their meat only, but their goal was to release their souls from the lowest levels of the hell of generation and corruption, and to transfer them from the state of deficiency to the state of completion and perfection in the human form which is the most complete and perfect form under the sphere of the Moon. For this form is the last gateway in the hell of generation and corruption, as we have explained before in the epistle on the wisdom of death [epistle 29].⁵²

This seems to be a clear reference to the doctrine of reincarnation. Although the Ikhwān are probably deliberately vague about it, there are many passages that support their adherence to the doctrine.⁵³ As for Greek Platonists, reincarnation is related to the soul’s gradual reascent from material to the spiritual world, the counterpart of the downwards progression of creation in which the soul descends down to the lowest ranks of materiality. The slaughter of animals is, then, allowed because when they are killed, their lot may in fact be improved insofar as they are reincarnated in the human form. Remarkably, this is the same argument that al-Rāzī, another Muslim advocate of reincarnation, made to justify the killing of animals.⁵⁴ While for Greek philosophers animal to human transmigration was an argument for adopting vegetarianism,⁵⁵ for the Muslim authors it is an argument for eating meat. Nevertheless, it does not seem to be merely a coincidence that these two authors advocating the doctrine of transmigration are also among the very few classical Arabic authors who raise the treatment of animals as an ethical concern. The fact that animal souls may reincarnate to human bodies, does appear to accord the animals higher value for them than to most of their contemporaries. With regard to the Ikhwān’s fable, the reincarnation of animal souls to human bodies also means that, while the trial in the end condemns the animals to remain in servitude, they may eventually be compensated for their suffering by being reincarnated to a human body.

The fable itself confirms the view that the main ground on which the Ikhwān base their animal ethics is the animal capacity to feel pain. The fable contains a great number of passages depicting the suffering of various animal species in the hands of the human kind which are clearly meant to arouse compassion for animals in the reader. In the beginning of the fable, various domestic animals from donkey to mule each in their turn graphically decry the torments to which their human masters subject

⁵² *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Music: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 5* (ed. and transl. O. Wright; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismā‘īlī Studies, 2010), pp. 94-5 [my translation].

⁵³ These pertain especially to the *Comprehensive Epistle*. The relevant passages are analyzed in Yves Marquet, *La philosophie des Iḥwān al-Ṣafā’: Nouvelle édition augmentée* (Paris and Milan: S.É.H.A and Archè, 1999), pp. 383ff. Marquet himself changed his view from earlier articles where he had claimed that the Ikhwān denied the doctrine of reincarnation.

⁵⁴ Al-Rāzī, *Rasā’il*, p. 105.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, *Animals, Gods, and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and early Christian Ideas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 65.

them each day.⁵⁶ Even if the fable, then, in the end accepts the human claim of the superiority of the human being, and its ethical consequence of the human right to enslave animals and kill them for food, it also conveys the message that the human masters should not cause needless suffering to their animal servants. This seems to be the key moral lesson concerning animals that the Ikhwān wish to convey by their fable. It is perhaps best transmitted through the words of a nomad protesting against the suggestion of city dwellers to sell all domestic animals for profit, if animals were to win the case:

‘If we did that, we’d be left with no milk to drink or meat to eat, no woollen clothes or blankets, no furnishings of hair or fleece, no shoes or sandals, no water skins, rugs, bedding or covers. We’d remain naked, barefoot, miserable, and in a poor state. Death would be better for us than such a life. And the people of the cities would be afflicted like us. Don’t sell them or free them, don’t even consider it. Instead make their lives better, lighten their loads, and show them kindness, sympathy, and mercy. For they are flesh and blood like you are. They feel and suffer. You had no special merit in God’s eyes that He was rewarding when He subjected them to you; and they committed no offense or sin in God’s eyes for which He would have punished them.’⁵⁷

Conclusions

Medieval Islamic authors produced a voluminous literature on animals, most of which still waits to be studied from any perspective, let alone that of the human animal studies. Animals appear prominently in the Quran, as well as the literary genres of the religious sciences, animal fables, prose literature (*adab*), and philosophy. These genres provide very different outlooks to the human animal relations. While the Quran contains many passages that suggest that animals are subordinate to human beings, it also contains passages that can be employed to argue for their intrinsic, non-instrumental value. Arabic zoology and philosophical psychology often also accord what seem to be higher cognitive functions to animals, despite the fact that from the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic metaphysical and psychological basis the subordinate position of animals remains undisputed. A handful of philosophical authors also raise the ethical question of the treatment of animals, based on either the providential purposefulness of all living beings or the animal capacity to feel pain. Finally, the animal fables employ animals mainly as a literary device to convey ideas concerning the human world.

The Ikhwān’s animal fable is best understood in the context of all these genres. First, in its fable form it is situated within the rich tradition of Arabic animal fables, inspired by *Kalīla and Dimna* in particular. But it is an exceptional animal fable both in its apparently unprecedented portrayal of a trial between animals and human beings, and in the fact that the animals at least partly constitute its subject matter and are not employed merely as a literary device. Second, the potential ambiguity of the Quran with respect to the status of animals is exploited by the Ikhwān’s fable in the sense that the two Quranic perspectives are put forward by the two sides of the dispute, even if the *Epistles* in general side with the view that human being is God’s viceregent on earth and therefore delegated with authority over the other animal species. Third, it is not coincidental that the fable is set in the 22nd zoological epistle, but the fable in fact aims to convey knowledge about the animal species, as well as

⁵⁶ *The Case of the Animals*, pp. 56-9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 85-6 [translation p. 148 cited with modifications].

point towards the divine providence that they manifest, and should therefore also be understood within the context of the Aristotelian zoological tradition.

Although the fable's setup seems to question a sharp ontological distinction between human beings and other animals, and its ethical consequence of the legitimacy of the human employment of animals, it is clear from the basis of the fable's ending, the introduction, and the *Epistles* as a whole that this is not a genuine problem for the authors. However, the introduction and the *Epistles* do support the view that the human cruelty towards animals depicted in the fable is a genuine ethical problem for the Ikhwān, primarily because of the animal capacity to feel pain, although the relatively high value that the Ikhwān accord to animals is probably also related to their belief on reincarnation. In sum, the authors of the fable do not claim that human beings should stop employing animals for food and other benefits, but clearly they do claim that human beings should inflict as little suffering to other animals as possible.