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The Principles of Animal Advocacy in Islam: Four Integrated Ecognitions

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Abstract

The Qurʾān—the scripture of the Muslims, which purports to be from the Creator of the Universe—presents a rational, holistic, and integrated view of life, where the human being is considered an integral, coexistential part of nature who has responsibilities as representative of the Creator on earth. This responsibility is both based on, and directed by, four principles/realizations called “ecognitions,” from which all animal rights can be formulated and through which a case for proactive animal advocacy can be advanced. It is argued that the Qurʾānic view, from which the four ecognitions are drawn, has the potential to enable the coexistence of human and nonhuman animals, in an optimally harmonious way, for the 21st century and beyond.

Keywords

āḥad, dīn, ecognition, Equigenic Principle, khilāfab, nafṣ, Qurʾān, rūḥ, taqwā

Introduction

Our attitudes toward interacting with nature in general and other creatures in particular depend upon our outlook toward life. We all live according to a set of beliefs and values; in this sense, everyone follows a particular philosophy or religion. Yet most people tend to think that religion gives guidance only in “spiritual matters.” By contrast, the Islamic worldview, as argued by those Muslims who derive a rationalist view from the Qurʾān, is integrated and global;¹ it is founded upon reason and action, infused with a consciousness of One God (Allah).² In this vein, Islam provides a comprehensive code of conduct for our worldly life, extending moral considerations toward nature as part of a truly universal ethics. The Islamic worldview and precepts, based on this viewpoint, contain absolutely no distinction between “spiritual” and “physical” well-being, or between “religion” and “secularism.”³ In fact, Islam,

in this Qur'anic, source-based perspective, represents a worldview in which social and ecological systems are intertwined as a unit, where the material well-being of human beings is considered interdependent upon, and interwoven with, the well-being of the rest of nature, including the different kinds of life on earth. In this age of rampant destruction of ecosystems, animal experimentation, factory farming, and other forms of cruelty and disruption, those with a strong sense of universal justice would want to intervene and defend nature and animals, who are an essential part of nature—to be advocates for the animals. But does animal advocacy exist in Islam? Is there indeed a philosophical basis in Islam for animal advocacy? If so, what value does Islam place on animals?

The Case for Animal Advocacy

The philosophical justification and basis for Islamic animal advocacy consists of the following principles, which recognize and uphold inherent ecological values, termed *ecognition*, from *ecological recognition*:

Ecognition 1: All nonhuman animals are a trust from God.

Ecognition 2: *Equigenic rights* do exist and must be maintained.

Ecognition 3: All nonhuman animals live in communities.

Ecognition 4: All nonhuman animals possess personhood.

Ecognition 1: All Nonhuman Animals Are a Trust from God.

The Qur'an consistently and explicitly mentions, in numerous verses, that the entire natural world belongs to God and God alone:

And unto God belongs the dominion over the heavens [all galactical and related intergalactical systems] and the earth: and God has the power over all things. (3:189)⁴
Blessed... is He to whom belongs the dominion of the heavens [all galactical and related intergalactical systems], and the earth; He who has begotten no son, nor has any partner in His dominion: for it is He who creates, designs and shapes everything, and precisely lays it out through natural laws, that determine its developmental pathway. (25:1-2)

Humankind is given only temporary successorship/stewardship [*khilāfah*] of the natural world, as a test. Therefore, humankind is responsible and accountable for any abuses of the earth's life forms or natural resources (6:165).

And whatever is in the heavens [all galactical and related intergalactical systems] and whatever is on the earth is God's; and certainly We enjoined those who were given the (revelatory) Book before you and We enjoin you too, that you should keep your duty to God. (4:131)

Ecognition 2: Equigenic Rights Do Exist and Must Be Maintained.

To establish a truly egalitarian society, our concept of rights must be reappraised. We have become so used to thinking in terms of human rights that we tend to ignore the rights of other creatures and of nature in general. Of course, the cause of human rights is of utmost importance, but so, too, are animal rights and ecological rights. These domains are ultimately indivisible, as evinced by what we shall term The Equigenic Principle—i.e., equality or balance established through nature, as designed by God. The Equigenic Principle protects rights that are realized when human beings recognize nature's dynamic equilibrium through its structural-cum-functional design. The Equigenic Principle is based on a dynamic balance and hence, on the nature of cause and effect. Therefore, this balance is not relative or human-made; rather, it is absolute. This principle forms the foundation of individual rights and justice. The measure of the health of society is a function of how close we are to realizing this principle (Banaei & Haque, 1995; see, in particular, chapter three, on the Equigenic Principle itself).

With the Equigenic Principle, humans, nonhumans, and the environment can attain harmonious and reinforcing interrelationships. This is succinctly and cogently captured in two Qur'anic passages:

It is He [God] who has created the expansive universe and established the balance [*mīzān*], so that you may not disrupt the balance. Therefore, weigh things in equity and do not fall short of maintaining that balance. (55:7-9)

We have surely sent messengers with clear evidences, and sent them with the Book [the Qur'ān] and the Balance [the Equigenic Principle], so that human beings may behave with equity. (57:25)

Unfortunately, in the nominal Muslim world, with the un-Qur'anic depreciation of the rational worldview since the 12th century CE, it has not been widely realized or stressed as it should have been, that two separate yet perfectly corresponding sources are referred to in this verse. The "book" and the "balance" refer to the book of nature (the Qur'ān) and the balance of nature. In Islam, nature is the primary revelation, and the Qur'ān is a perfect mirror reflecting that prime reality. This realization has immense implications for how society ought to structure itself and deal with the myriad other creatures that inhabit the earth.

Ecognition 3: All Animals Live in Communities.

Muslims are responsible for animals. Islam has gone to great lengths to lay down principles on which humankind's relationship with other species ought to be based. Unfortunately, in spite of this wealth of guidance in the Qur'an and the authentic *Aḥādīth* (i.e., the corroborated sayings of Prophet Muhammad; the singular is *ḥadīth*), not enough attention has been paid to the fact that the Qur'an seals the biological parity between humans and the rest of the species with passages such as the following:

There is not a nonflying and two-winged flying [water/carbon-based] creature, but they are in communities like yourselves. (6:38)
 He (God) has appointed, precisely established and positioned the earth [both the planet as a whole, and the earth's crust itself] for the maintenance and development of sentient life forms [both humans and nonhumans]. (55:10)⁵

These verses teach us of the respectful interdependence of all the various interspecies communities that exist on the earth, of which human communities are an integral part.⁶

Ecognition 4: All Nonhuman Animals Possess Personhood.

Human beings tend to regard themselves as being special because they feel they are *uniquely* endowed with intelligence, self-awareness, higher communication abilities, and a soul. Using these assumptions about uniqueness, humans often trample callously upon other species because they think that nonhumans either do not possess these abilities or faculties, or, if they do, that they exist in a primitive state. Indeed, humans tend to justify their actions according to these unsubstantiated assumptions. The Qur'anic—and hence Islamic—outlook reveals to us, however, that these assumptions are incongruent with reality and that if nonhuman animals' attributes are understood properly, great untapped and embracing knowledge exists that could lead to a revolution in the largely discordant relationship between humans and other species.

Nonhuman Animal Communication

The Islamic perspective acknowledges animal communication in ways not yet recognized by science, though recent research is in fact shedding more light on animal communication. Fourteen centuries ago, the Qur'an mentioned numerous animals and their relationship with human beings in unique contexts:

Solomon was David's heir, and he said: Lo! my people: We have been taught bird language and have been given [the abundance] of all [good] things—this indeed is a distinct favor on us. (27:16)

The Qur'an also describes ants communicating meaningfully with one another. It mentions an ant who is on the lookout and warns fellow ants of impending doom; they had better evacuate immediately, lest Solomon and his entourage crush them unwittingly:

[A]nd then they were led forth in orderly ranks, until, when they came upon a valley of ants, an ant exclaimed: "O you ants! Get into your dwellings, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you unawares." (27:17-18)

The ant identifies Solomon and his group, and her own ant community, and seeks to avoid being killed. Solomon, we are told, not only understood this communication but took delight in the discourse:

Thereupon [Solomon] smiled joyously at her⁷ communication. (27:19)

Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that the ant is aware of Solomon's awareness; this type of meta-awareness requires a very high degree of social intelligence.

Present-day researchers note that ants communicate by pheromones, tactile sensors, vibrations, and so on. E. O. Wilson encountered a variety of chemicals in his observations of ants:

One message means "Follow me." Another: "On guard! A threat to the public good is present." (This was the message in the scent that Wilson had evoked by picking apart the tree stump in Rock Creek Park; the alarm pheromone [chemical signal] of [the ant species] *Acanthomyops* is essence of citronella.) (Wright, 1988, pp. 128-129)

From the example of the ants, we can draw the following conclusions: In the Qur'an, nonhuman animals are self-conscious and have a highly sophisticated language. They have what we refer to as words and sentences—that is, highly developed syntax and semantics. This does not mean that they communicate just as we do. Whatever their form of communication, however, ethological evidence is fast piling up that it is meaningful in their own modes. In chapter 27, verse 16 of the Qur'an, animal language is not considered a special miracle, but a law of nature akin to human language *because it can be learned*. If, therefore, according to the Qur'an, animal communication is based on the laws of nature, albeit designed by God, it is neither difficult nor unreasonable to

extrapolate that creatures other than birds and ants, with similar nervous systems, are also endowed with similar communicational abilities.

The Qur'ān (24:41) further tells us that nonhuman animals, who offer their obeisance to God in every movement, know what they are doing. This verse makes it abundantly clear that they are capable of consciously performing such acts, and, being Muslim (always in total submission to God), they coexist with their environs in constant, natural genuflection.

Animal Intelligence

Nonhuman animals have been denied intelligence for a variety of reasons. Classical philosophers and scholastics have long been entangled in the intricacies of defining the psyches of animals so as to maintain human power and control. Aristotle, for example, went to great lengths to distinguish between the “active” and the “passive” intellect. Some philosophers have equated intellect with the capacity to create or to deal with ideas through the “analytical” and “dividing” intellects. Platonists, such as Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), have tended to treat intellect as a faculty for apprehending “the higher truths.”

Intelligence is also often erroneously viewed as connected with verbal communication, and nonhuman animals are often held in contempt because they cannot speak human languages. The absence of the power of speech has often also been viewed as an indication of mindlessness, which has led to the impression that nonhuman animals not only have no intellect but also have no feelings and therefore do not deserve the same treatment that we accord our fellow human beings. Animals, furthermore, have been denied intelligence by such thinkers as Descartes who have equated intelligence with volition and free will and have assumed that animals do not possess any of these capacities. Other scholars have associated intelligence with morality, creativity, abstract reasoning, and aesthetic appreciation. Such philosophers take a narrow and biased view of intelligence. In contrast, the Arabic word used to signify reason in the Qur'ān is *'aql*, from the root *'aqala*, which is based on *'iqāl*, a word that denotes a cord used to tie a camel's legs so that the animal does not run away. It therefore means “to bind” and hence “to secure something.” Reason, therefore, secures reality by interconnecting information. Since nonhuman animals also interconnect things to attain goals, they also use *'aql*. What animals interconnect in their natural state corresponds with the Equigenic Principle.

Human beings' intellectual flexibility and greater degree of freedom to connect/disconnect things, intellectually and manually, allows them to *disconnect* what ought to be connected and *connect* what ought *not* to be connected in

nature; this disruption in the equigenic flow and pattern designed by God leads to harm. In other words, the human mind can choose to disrupt the dynamic balances in nature, thus violating the Equigenic Principle. According to the Qur'an, however, if we take the path toward the destruction of life, rather than its affirmation, humans are reduced to a level lower than that of a nonhuman animal (95:5). Indeed, such persons utterly fail to use *'aql*—that is, to connect things the way they were meant to be connected; they therefore shed their humanity by failing to live up to the Equigenic Principle. Although the human being is indeed an animal, categorized by the Qur'anic word *dabbāb*—a water/carbon-based⁸ creature that can move spontaneously, as described in verse 24:45—a *conditional hierarchy* prevails in the Qur'an. This hierarchy elevates human animals above nonhuman animals when we treat nonhuman animals and the rest of nature properly and reduces the human person to a mere shell of a human being when we fail in our rightful role. In that case, we alienate ourselves from both God and nature; indeed, we become like aliens with false preconceptions who have crash-landed on a seemingly hostile planet.

The Islamic Concept of Animal “Souls”

Most commentators and exegetists, while expounding scriptures, have persistently assumed that “the soul,” used in the context of animals, means nothing more than a kind of subliminal self (i.e., a conscious state of mind not sufficiently developed to be recognized). Theologians did the same concerning slaves. In order to give moral and ethical sanction to the slave trade, they used holy scripture to try to prove that the “Negroid group” was of a lower stratum of humanity. Early European scholastic renderings of scripture are also full of interpretations supporting male dominance over females and nonhumans. It took conscientious objectors a very long time to convince such narrow-minded clerics that their scriptural interpretations were wrong.

The notion that animals possess no soul and hence are not protected by virtue of any “religious” sanction against mistreatment and slaughter is quite contrary to Islamic teachings. For example, the Qur'an forbids the killing of any “breathing beings,” except for a justifiable reason, such as self-defense, and declares such killing to be one of the most abominable misdeeds (6:151, 17:33). In a complementary *hadith*, the Prophet states that one must not kill a *nafs*, which Allah has made sacrosanct, except for a justifiable reason.⁹ The Arabic word *nafs* applies to (though it is not limited to) any creature that has respiration. Prophet Muhammad used these very verses (6:151 and 17:33) to

support his declaration that: "If any person kills a sparrow or anything smaller without justification, God will question him/her about it."¹⁰ Does this mean that animals have souls? Alongside *nafs*, there is another term used in the Qur'an (32:9) in connection with life: *rūḥ*. *Rūḥ* is generally translated as "soul": "And they will ask you about the *rūḥ*. Say: "This *rūḥ* is by my Sustainer's command, and you have been granted but a small portion [of the body] of knowledge [needed to know its exact nature.]" (17:85).

Rūḥ is brought into existence by Allah's creative commandment and is sustained by His will.¹¹ Both *nafs* and *rūḥ* are connected to the created consciousness that arises from the infinitely rich imagination of God—that is, from His transcendent, ever-existing consciousness, since, logically speaking, created consciousness (according to the Qur'an) can only come from, and be sustained by, a higher consciousness. *Rūḥ* relates to the created and sustained consciousness and *nafs* to the personality and individuality that develops, based on the life experiences associated with that consciousness, created as a sustained command from the mind of God.

To understand the Qur'anic concepts of *rūḥ* and *nafs* properly, however, one must understand that God is a personal deity that is absolutely incomparable, one and indivisible (*āḥad*), and that everything is part of this eternal and infinite being's imaginal-cum-creative command, but not part of "His" (or "Its") essence. This differs altogether from pantheistic and monistic teachings, which have no support in the Qur'an whatsoever.¹² If the full import of the actual relation between creation and the essence of God is comprehended in the light of the *uniform* process by which consciousness arises in all human and nonhuman animals, it would help us in realizing the true affinity between all creatures, who issue forth from God's creative acts; all creatures, therefore, are dear to God and have sanctity.

Individuals who have companion animals often ask and wonder what happens to their dogs, cats, turtles, and so on, after they die. Just as the Qur'an accurately and remarkably described the Big Bang, far in advance of science,¹³ so, too, the Qur'an tells us that when this universe is terminated by the Creator, it will be replaced by a new and different type of universe (14:48 and 36:81). In light of the continuance of the *nafs*, or *rūḥ*, the Qur'an declares that all animals will be gathered unto their Creator after death. It is the will of God that determines whether or not individual consciousness continues in the next life in a new and different, albeit similar, form. This is why the Qur'an declares that *all* creatures will be gathered unto their Sustainer, not just human beings (6:38).

Therefore, as we can see, animal advocacy in Islam perceives that all living beings have been endowed with "*nafs*" or "*rūḥ*," without which they would

remain agricultural products and commercial commodities, which human beings could treat any way they please. On the contrary, the Islamic position, based on the Qur'ān, is that all creatures possess *nafs*, which survives after physical death to be gathered unto the Creator. Each human will be held individually accountable, after death, for individual actions. The human animal's treatment of nonhuman animals and nature will be judged on par with the treatment of our fellow human beings. It has been concluded in the *Mishkat Al-Masabih*, which contains the Prophet Muhammad's *Aḥādīth* from Bukhārī and Muslim, that "a good deed done to an animal is as good as doing good to a human being; while an act of cruelty to a beast is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being" (Robson, 1963, Book 6, Chapter 7; 8:178.) Note the equality of treatment of humans and animals. Many *Aḥādīth* elaborate on the passages from the Qur'ān on the Day of Judgment, or the Day of Accountability: all sane adult human beings will be held culpable for wrongs done to nonhuman animals and the environment (99:1-8). Indeed, the suffering endured by every single creature of God is recorded so that complete justice is meted out.

Interrelationships between the Four Ecognitions

The four ecognitions lay the foundation for rethinking our treatment of animals. Legislation regarding animals must be seen and assessed in light of each of these ecognitions, and in light of the interrelationships between these ecognitions. For example, what is the relationship between animal intelligence and the Equigenic Principle? With the proper Islamic view of animal personhood, would we cage animals for entertainment? If the rain forest, sustaining countless life forms, belongs to God, would we purposefully desecrate His property? If animals possess personhood and dwell in communities, how can factory farming be morally acceptable? If animals have personhood and feelings, should we taunt or make fun of them? If we perform painful experiments on animals, do we not violate all four ecognitions?

Let us identify the ecognitions more specifically: from the Qur'ānic definition of *'aql* (Ecognition 4), we can see that nonhuman animals have intelligence. What does this require of those who live with dogs and cats, if they follow the laws of God humbly (Ecognition 2). If we are the trustees of our companion animals, are we fulfilling our role (Ecognition 1)? What are the psychological (Ecognition 4) and equigenic (Ecognition 2) implications of breaking up nonhuman animal communities (Ecognition 3)? This type of deep and interconnectional thinking regarding the four ecognitions should

foster a tremendous sense of awe and respect for these “Others” and also guide us in solving our multifarious interspecies problems. This way of thinking informs us that “they” are not just dumb brutes to be used as commodities for our own capricious whims and insatiable desires.

From a rationalist reading of the Qur’ānic injunctions, the optimization of animal advocacy can be achieved only through an interrelational recognition of the four ecognitions. It is with such an understanding that a universal charter of “animal rights” can and ought to be established: one that would be imbued with *taqwā* (the One God—Allah, “consciousness” and “harm consciousness”), not just a mere list of do’s and don’ts. *Taqwā* is a very deep and comprehensive word, which means in part that one is conscious of the presence of God at all times and therefore will not harm things in this life, as one will face the dire consequences for one’s intentional actions in the next life. Indeed, *taqwā* serves to integrate the four ecognitions in one’s thought patterns. It elevates both individual and communal responsibility for nonhuman sentient life forms to the very same level that human lives command. By understanding and acting upon these “equigenic” concepts, animal advocacy becomes proactive rather than simply reactive. Those Muslims who are advocating an evidence-based view of Islam, therefore, believe that this proper Islamic belief system, based on the Qur’ān, engenders appreciation and responsibility for creation, and that this naturally leads to compassion. This arises, ultimately, due to a foundation that takes into consideration the sustaining Reality behind the reality we see in front of us, where spirituality is part and parcel of rational thought, and could be called higher reasoning. Such higher reasoning would naturally lead human beings to maintain and enhance the inherent dignity of all the myriad creatures of God.

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Notes

1. Islam is both culture-free and universal: “All praise belongs to God, the Cherisher, Sustainer and Evolver unto completion of the worlds” (Qur’ān: 1:2). The Qur’ān states that Prophet Muhammad was sent with a message as a mercy to the worlds (21:106-107).

2. On being conscious of God (Allah), the Qur’ān states: “This book is free of doubt [regarding proof of its divine origin and the truth-value of its statements] and is a guidance for those who are conscious of God.” For verses on reason, which are too numerous to cite, see, for

example: 2:44, 3:190, 191; 16:90; 8:22; 4:82; 17:36; and 67:10. Perhaps if the Qur'an were ever to have been given another name, it could have been called *The Book of Reason*. In 67:10, for example, it is stated that one achieves salvation only through reason.

3. The Arabic word *din*, which is used for "religion/belief system" is so comprehensive that its meaning is not capable of being captured in one word in the European languages. Essentially, *din* means "a way of life in which one submits to one thing or another." The great Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) states that "[d]in is the infinitive of the verb *ddna*, *yadīnu* which means to submit and surrender" (see Abdul-Haqq Ansari, 2000, p. 316). The fact is that we all have a way of life, and we all submit to, or believe in, something or another. If we are not sure what to believe in, it is because of assumptions that lead us to uncertainty! The difference between the *din* espoused by the Qur'an and others is that the source of its knowledge and precepts (the Qur'an itself) is claimed to be without any inconsistencies, and it challenges all sentient entities to that effect (see Qur'an 4:82).

4. All translations of passages from the Qur'an are the authors'.

5. The word *wada'ahā*, used in this passage from the Qur'an, means a combination of all these meanings: appoint; precisely establish and position; and maintain and develop, as a careful study of the usage of this word in the Qur'an attests.

6. See Foltz, 2006.

7. Note the accuracy of the Qur'an in describing these particular ants as female; all worker ants are female.

8. The Qur'an describes life as having been made—and originated—from water. Although it naturally does not mention carbon, we know that all water-based life is carbon-based. The reason "carbon-based" has been explicitly expressed in this description is that the Qur'an states that there are other entities made of a more subtle energy form, which we would argue are not carbon-based; these are the *jinn*.

9. Narrated by Abu Huraira in *Sahih Muslim – Kitab al-Iman*; Chapter 32, Vol. 1, p. 52; in *Sahih Bukhari*, 4:23. Also in *Awn al-M'bud Sharh Abu Dawud*, *Hadith* No. 2857. Does this mean one could argue that the Qur'an favors a vegetarian diet? Please see Haque, 2011, pp. 178-184, where this question has been addressed.

10. Narrated by Ibn 'Umar and by Abdallah bin Al-As in *Nasai* 7:206, 239.

11. In *From Microbits to Everything: Universe of the Imaginator, Volume 2: The Philosophical Implications*, Haque and Muslim offer a detailed examination of the *rūh*—the mind and consciousness.

12. The Qur'an (112:1-4) states that God is singular, unique, indivisible, eternal, absolute, self-sufficient; it is "He" upon whom all depend, "He" who does not beget and was never begotten, and "He" who cannot be compared to anything created or thought of. When we use "He" to describe God, "He" is not taken to mean a male anthropomorphic deity.

13. The Big Bang was described in the Qur'an, about 1,400 years ago, in the following verses, literally translated: "Do those who cover the truth not see that the entire universe, including the earth, was joined together as one piece, which We [God] ripped apart/split, and made every [carbon-based] life form out of water? Will they [even] then not believe?" (21:30).

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