The Brethren of Purity
The Case of Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: *An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of* Epistle 22, trans. and ed. Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor.
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In the medieval animal fable *The Case of Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*, animals rise up and speak against human beings. This new edition and translation makes an excellent beginning to the huge project undertaken by the Institute of Ismaili Studies to produce the first critical edition and translation of the *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity* (Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa). The *Epistles* is an important part of Islamic intellectual history, although not principally for its philosophical achievements, but rather for the originality of the work and its influence on the later development of Islamic thought. The fascination of this particular epistle for the present-day reader arises from its concern with animal rights, as well as from other allegorical layers in the fable.

'The Brethren of Purity' is the pen name of a writer or a group of writers who worked during the tenth century in Basra. The *Epistles* is composed in the form of a scientific encyclopaedia and consists of 52 epistles on different topics and a longer summarizing epistle. The work is divided into four parts: mathematical sciences, natural sciences, the sciences of the soul and religious sciences. Its main objective is to transmit a syncretistic, 'salvational' wisdom that combines Greek philosophy with Islamic sources and that, for the most part, follows the teachings of the Ismailis. *The Case of Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn* is the 22nd of the epistles, and the longest. Already during the middle ages this epistle was translated into various languages. Although the Brethren often employ anecdotes, this is the only epistle presented in the form of a fable.

The fable relates how a shipwreck leads to a group of seventy men ending up on an island where they find animals living free of human domination. The situation ignites an argument between the species, which ends up in the court overseen by the King of the Jinns, spiritual creatures of Islamic tradition. The animals elect representatives, one from each animal group. At court, the animals are given voices and the chance to tell of the cruelties they have suffered at the hands of humans. Representing human beings are seven men, one from each of the seven nations. The King of the Jinns listens to the arguments for and against the dominance of humans over the other creatures. The superiority of the human being cannot be proved, either by physical form or by the array of human faculties: there is always an animal that outdoes the human. Nor does refined food or entertainment distinguish humans as being in a class of their own. On the contrary, those are seen as a source of trouble and illness. Even the rationality of human beings does not convince the court. One by one, the attributes characteristic of the

crowning glory of creation are shown to have parallels in the animal kingdom, and the superiority of humans remains in doubt.

Like the *Epistles* as a whole, the story has different layers. In the encyclopaedia, it forms part of the natural sciences. While ethnology and some other fields are also touched upon, the epistle could be approached as a chapter on zoology enlivened by an animal perspective. Various zoological questions, characteristics of animal species, their bodily structures and their habitats are examined in the course of the fable. In their biological thought, the Brethren do not show much advance over their ancient predecessors, and most of the conceptions (as well as misconceptions) in zoology are from ancient authors such as Aristotle and Galen.

Some scholars have been eager to discover indications of pre-Darwinian ideas in the fable. It is easy to agree with Goodman (24-8) that the Brethren's Neoplatonic ontology contradicts the evolution of the species on various points, even if there are some features that incline towards Darwinian ideas. According to the Brethren's emanationist hierarchy of beings, the species belonging to the three realms inhabiting the earth—minerals, plants and animals—originally appeared in the order from simplest to the most valuable. The first to appear were minerals, while creation was crowned with man—a middle-being participating in both the realm of the animals and, potentially, in that of the angels. Middle-beings appear not only between the realms, but also between individual species: the Brethren refer to the giraffe as a cross between a camel and an ass. This is, however, a manner of emphasizing the continuity of the chain of being more than constituting a reference to evolution.

One feature that the epistle shares with other medieval encyclopaedias and especially with later cosmographies is that they examine the wonders of the animal realm with emphasis on the purposeful nature of creation: each species follows the form and has the faculties that suit it best. What is exceptional in the Brethren's approach is the role they take. According to Goodman, what the Brethren intend by giving animals the ability to speak is to 'find a way of getting outside oneself, beyond the constructs and constrictions of the familiar culture and even the shared biases of humanity' (7). In attempting to assume this neutral position, the Brethren emphasize the paradox between the relative and the absolute positions of human being. On the one hand, they want the reader to reflect on the variety in creation and, on the other hand, they remind man of his position in the cosmic drama. Although the human being is distinguished by his unique ability to climb up the chain of being, 'the whole system is the goal' (35).

Goodman's reference to Orwell's revolutionary farm inhabitants (4) encourages us to see a political layer in the Brethren's text. The descriptions of the animal rulers, for instance, can be read as a political allegory. The Platonic city-state metaphor, in which the human being is compared with a state, frequently appears in the *Epistles* and in this fable as well. For the Brethren, the city-state comparisons, however, are primarily cosmological, and the political dimension of the metaphor is only of secondary importance. The same applies to the political interpretation of this fable. In spite of its

echoes of an ideal society, the moral message of the story is more clearly connected with the development of an individual.

The Brethren do not completely satisfy the reader who is in search of a medieval manifesto by animal freedom fighters; ultimately, the human being wins, at least in this world era. This does not nullify the meaning of the discussion of animal rights: leaving the idea in the air is radical enough for a text of the tenth century. After all, the deepest concern of the writers is not animals or even their relationship to human beings. As in the ideology of the Brethren as a whole, the central topic of the epistle is the idea of man and his path to perfection. Nonetheless, the achievement of perfection is linked with both the knowledge of creation as a whole, including the sciences, such as zoology, and moral issues, among them the treatment of animals. The ox instructs human beings using an analogy with an emanationist flavor: 'See how the sun pours light unstintingly on all creatures from its generous portion. The moon and stars too shed their influences, each according to its powers. Men should do the same, since they are granted divine gifts that other animals lack. They should share their gifts unsparingly' (125).

The editors' careful work can be seen throughout the book. The introduction systematically examines the epistle within the frameworks of philosophy and literature, drawing parallels to previous and later writers, from the Hebrew Bible and Aesop's *Fables* to Montaigne and Orwell. An interesting addition, despite the evident differences, would have been a stylistic contextualization of the work from the perspective of the philosophical allegories in Islamic tradition, such as those of Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185) and as-Suhrawardi (d. 1191).

The commentary is very detailed. It contains profound analyses of the text and indicates allusions to principles of the Brethren's thought. At times, the comments address very basic topics and provide an introduction, not only to the thought of the Brethren or Islamic philosophy in general, but also to Islam. A reader already familiar with these matters is naturally free to skip these comments, but, in some places, the comments could have been shorter and less repetitive; occasionally, simply a reference to the introduction would have sufficed.

The language of the translation is lively. A fluent invigoration of the Brethren's quite simple Arabic text does it no harm. For readers interested in using the English translation as an aid for reading the Arabic text, it would have been a great advantage to have had the translation printed parallel to the original text. An edition with abundant vocalization works for study purposes. The appendices on geographical zones, Iranian history and especially on religious traditions are extremely useful. Only Appendix A, which lists the scholars cited within the text, appears to be of limited use. In general, the work raises high expectations for future editions of the remaining epistles.

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