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# Suffering the Sons of Eve: Animal Ethics in al-Ma'arrī's *Epistle of the Horse and the Mule*

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**Abstract:** In the year 1021 CE, blind author and skeptic Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 1057 CE) wrote *Risālat al-ṣāhil wa-l-shāḥij* (The Epistle of the Horse and the Mule), a winding prose work populated by animal characters who talk about poetry, grammar, riddles, and Syrian society on the eve of the crusades. Traditionally forgotten as a source for al-Ma'arrī's pacifism, and his vegan worldview, the *Ṣāhil* lets readers see his thinking on animals more than most other works. After a brief survey of animals in Islam, which shows a mainstream desire for balance between human and non-human needs, as well as exceptional cases that strongly uphold animals as subjects per se and which stand as key inter-texts for al-Ma'arrī, this paper considers how the *Ṣāhil* champions non-human creatures through images of animal cruelty deployed to shock readers into compassion, and through poetry and popular sayings (*amthāl*) recast in a zoocentric mold. It, therefore, advocates with more fervor than anthropocentric Islamic writings on animals, such as *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah* or the letters of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. However, this happens in a way that makes it hard to pin down the sources of al-Ma'arrī's thought. Furthermore, al-Ma'arrī seems to contradict himself when, for example, he employs literal meaning when it comes to animal justice, even as he avoids literalism in other contexts. This calls his concern for animals into question in one sense, but in another, it affirms such concern insofar as his self-contradictions show an active mind working through animal ethics in real time.

**Keywords:** *amthāl*; Arabic literature; Islam; poetry; ethics; animals; veganism

## 1. Introduction

"We are the tribes of equus—hardships are thrown on our necks and attacks heaped on our backs." So whimpers the horse to the mule in the *Risālat al-ṣāhil wa-l-shāḥij* (Epistle of the Horse and the Mule) of blind poet, philologist, and skeptic Abū l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 1057 CE).<sup>1</sup> Writing around the year 1021 CE (Smoor 1982, p. 50), al-Ma'arrī meant the *Ṣāhil* ostensibly as a plea to the Fatimid-vassal governor of Aleppo, Abū Shujā' Fātik 'Azīz al-Dawlah (d. 1022 CE)<sup>2</sup>, to pardon a land tax owed by al-Ma'arrī's relatives. This real life impetus mirrors the epistle's narrative frame, in which a cast of distressed animals—the titular mule (*al-shāḥij*, "Brayer") and horse (*al-ṣāhil*, "Neigher"), as well as the dove (*al-fākhīyah*, "Cooer"), the camel (Abū Ayyūb), the hyena (Umm 'Amr), and the fox (*Thu ālah*)—try and fail to deliver a message to the governor. In the process, they swap rumors about contemporary Syrian society on the eve of the crusades, but in fact, the bulk of the work is a paean to language itself: Qurān, ḥadīth, poetry, grammar, popular sayings, riddles, and other genres.

Surviving in two manuscripts at the Ḥasaniyyah Archive in Rabat, Morocco, the *Ṣāhil* was edited and published in 1975 by 'Āishah 'Abd al-Raḥmān "Bint al-Shāḥī" (daughter of the riverbank),

<sup>1</sup> (Al-Ma'arrī 1975). For more on al-Ma'arrī's life and works, see Pieter Smoor, "Al-Ma'arrī," *EI2*; (Antoon 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Given this governor's death date, Pieter Smoor estimates that the *Ṣāhil* was completed no later than 1020 CE ("Al-Ma'arrī," *EI2*).

whose critical introduction joins a mere handful of secondary studies (see also Smoor 1981, 1982; Barkoudah-Raoux 2009; Blankinship 2019a, pp. 15–18). Given this state of the art, people have often discounted the Ṣāhil as a window onto al-Ma'arrī's vegan<sup>3</sup>, pacifist worldview. This paper corrects the oversight with a study of animal ethics in the Ṣāhil, such as they are. Moving from the general to the specific, the paper starts by surveying early Islamic thought, in order to situate al-Ma'arrī, who left behind few unambiguous statements about what he believed and why, in the context of other thinkers and texts. The first part of this survey establishes the mainstream tendency of Islam, which is to balance compassion for animals against human need for them as a life-giving resource. The second half of the survey considers cases that stand out from this norm, including Sufi animism and Turco-Persian reincarnationism, in giving greater priority to animals as moral exemplars or as subjects deserving justice in their own right. These cases represent key antecedents and inter-texts for understanding al-Ma'arrī.

There follows a sketch of animals as portrayed throughout al-Ma'arrī's texts. He is in many ways a more convinced animal ethicist, and a more zoocentric writer overall, than those, such as the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, who uses animals mainly to comment on human society. That said, the finer points of his thought make it hard to pin down where he got his inspiration; he explicitly rejects Indic doctrines of reincarnation, and his focus on animal life per se departs from Byzantine neo-Manichaean groups, especially the Bogomils, whose avoidance of animal products draws on the (fundamentally anthropocentric) dualist struggle between spirit and matter. Such a challenge in establishing textual sources for al-Ma'arrī raises the possibility that more ephemeral matters, such as biography or psychology, played a role here.<sup>4</sup> The paper's last two sections each inspect a rhetorical tactic of the Ṣāhil itself. The first is a grim parade of human cruelties as recorded in poetry, popular maxims (*amthāl*), and folklore, in order to shock readers into sympathy for nonhuman creatures. The second is a recasting of poetry and popular *amthāl* in a zoocentric mold, one that stands at odds with traditional interpretation. These two strategies affirm al-Ma'arrī's concern for animals, yet at the same time, they raise puzzling incongruities about intellectual and cultural history that are hard to answer for certain. The point is not to solve such questions, but instead to show al-Ma'arrī working out his animal ethics—contradictions and all—in real time.

## 2. Considering the Nonhuman in Early Islam

To build his brick house of animal ethics, the Islamic thought tradition gave al-Ma'arrī plenty of straw. The main current of that tradition tries to balance between nonhuman creatures as sacred, respect worthy creatures, and as useful resources for humans, who often take priority. This balance is struck elegantly and succinctly in two Qur'anic verses about bees (16/al-Naḥl: 68–69):

And thy Lord revealed unto the bees, saying: 'Take unto yourselves of the mountains, houses, and of the trees, and of what they are building. Then eat all manner of fruit and follow the ways of your Lord easy to go upon.' Then comes there forth out of their bellies a drink of diverse hues wherein is healing for men. Surely in that is a sign for a people who reflect.<sup>5</sup>

God esteems the insects by addressing them in their own right, yet simultaneously consecrates their “diversely hued” output (*mukhtalifun alwānuhu*)—honey—for human benefit. This counterpoise obtains in the ḥadīth corpus too, wherein people are allowed to use animals, but within strict guidelines; they must provide for them, show kindness and relieve their suffering, and avoid their abuse.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> An admittedly anachronistic term, “vegan” comes closest to describing al-Ma'arrī's avoidance of all animal products, including fish, milk, eggs, and honey, plus his exhortation that everyone else should avoid them, too. For further discussion, see (Blankinship 2019b, p. 261), footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting further discussion of this point.

<sup>5</sup> (Arberry 1955), vol. 2, pp. 293–94.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of ḥadīth that spell out these guidelines, see (Furber 2015, pp. 7–17). One sees an overall concern for animal welfare in ḥadīths that tell of the Prophet praising a man for giving water to a thirsty dog (the *matn* states, “There is a reward

Metaphysically, the ḥadīth tradition but above all the Qurān honors animals as one of a few communities, alongside humans, angels, and jinn, who owe their existence to God and receive His mercy. Hence, Sarra Tlili's claim that the Qurān is basically theocentric and not anthropocentric—"any being that worships and obeys God obtains God's pleasure and is rewarded in the hereafter" (Tlili 2012, p. ix). Animals belong to God, a beneficent sovereign who cherishes them as valuable creations, and therefore how humans treat them can tip the scales of final judgement.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, mainstream Muslim belief holds that, like humans, animals will resurrect physically after death (ibid., p. 10).

For jurists, theologians, and philosophers, these factors all point to justice: do nonhumans deserve it, and if so, to what extent and on what grounds? The Muslim tradition, while typically prioritizing human need, does show compassion to animals because they have the ability suffer, which in turn suggests the ability to feel and perceive, similar to humans in kind if not degree. Early Arabic lexicography, kalām, fiqh, and Qurānic tafsīr all classify a given animal as dhū rūḥ, literally "who has blown breath" but roughly "life force" or "soul," a concept which in early texts had a wider semantic range, but which becomes more closely linked to humans after the nineteenth century (Tlili 2017, pp. 18–21). In *The Healing (Al-Shifā)* and *Salvation (Al-Najāh)*, Avicenna concedes to both humans and nonhumans a faculty called wahm, "estimation," which occupies a place "as the highest power among the soul's animal faculties" and can be thought of as a "pre-intellectual grasp of non-sensible intentions at the core of the judgements in question" — his favorite example is that of sheep sensing hostility from a wolf (Black 1993, p. 220).

Animals also enjoy powers of perception in the "Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn," which takes up most of Epistle 22 of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān 1957, vol. 2, pp. 203–377, at 213; Goodman and McGregor 2009, pp. 113–14). The segment about "The Acute Senses of the Animals" (Fī bayān jawdat al-ḥawāss fī l-ḥayawānāt) speaks of horses hearing footsteps in the night, or of ewes locating their farflung lambs one by one. Nonhuman characters also play a role in another philosophical allegory, Ibn Ṭufayl's Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān, whose title character is raised by a compassionate gazelle. After reflecting further, Ḥayy turns to vegetarianism to avoid "opposition to the work of the Creator," insofar as that work is embodied by His creatures (Ibn Ṭufayl 2008, pp. 77–79; Ṭufayl 2009, pp. 144–45).

With few exceptions, Islamic legal texts group animals under property ownership as far as their treatment goes (Furber 2015, pp. 1–2). In the Sunnī tradition, Ḥanbalī and Shāfi'ī jurists list fewer human needs that justify violence to animals, than do the Ḥanafīs and Mālikīs.<sup>8</sup> No wonder, then, that one of the firmest statements about "animal rights upon humans" (ḥuqūq al-bahāim wa-l-ḥayawān 'alā al-insān) appears in an influential text of Shāfi'ism, *Rules for Deriving Laws for the Benefit of Living Things (Qawā'id al-aḥkām fī maṣāliḥ al-anām)*<sup>9</sup> by 'Izz al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī<sup>10</sup> (d. 1262 CE) (Al-Sulamī 1991). A manual of legal theory (uṣūl al-fiqh) rather than practical rulings

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for every moistened liver" [fī kullī kabidīn raṭbatīn ajrun], meaning that every good deed, such as wetting the liver of thirsty animals—giving them water to drink—will be rewarded) (Al-Nīsābūrī 1991, vol. 4, p. 1761, #2244; Al-Bukhārī 2002, p. 569, #2363); or of a woman damned to hellfire for starving a cat to death (ḥattā māta jū an) (Al-Nīsābūrī 1991, vol. 4, p. 1760, #2242–2243; Al-Bukhārī 2002, p. 569, #2364–2365; p. 862 #3482).

<sup>7</sup> In the immediate Arab cultural milieu, some also saw kindness to animals as part of "manly virtue," *murū'ah*. For instance, the early writer Ṣāliḥ ibn Janāḥ (d. ca. 767 CE) says in his *Risālah fī l-adab wa-l-murū'ah*: "A man's kindness to his riding animals, his taking good care of them, and his support for them, is indeed a righteous act, a way toward prosperity, and one of the many aspects of manly virtue" (*Inna rifq al-rajul bi-dawābbihī wa-ḥusn tā āhudihī lahā wa-qiyāmihī 'alayhā amal min ā māl al-birr wa-sabab min asbāb al-ghinā wa-wajh min wujūh al-murū'ah*) (Kurd 'Alī 1913, part 2, p. 305). Thanks to Geert Jan van Gelder for this reference.

<sup>8</sup> According to Tlili, "the two [Sunnī] schools that are more text-oriented, the Shāfi'ī and the Ḥanbalī, are more attentive to nonhuman animals' well-being. Shāfi'īs and Ḥanbalīs, therefore, can more accurately be described as Hadīth champions than as animal champions. The two descriptions, however, are not mutually exclusive" (Tlili 2015, p. 244).

<sup>9</sup> Since the term *anām* refers, especially in post-Qurānic usage, to creatures seen as "rational" (*āqil*)—namely humans, angels, and jinn (Tlili 2012, p. 139)—It makes sense that the *Qawā'id* should focus on human rather than animal welfare. That said, Qurānic usage is often more capacious, e.g., the word *dābbah*, which in later texts means "nonhuman animal" but which, according to Qurān commentators, includes humans too (Tlili 2010).

<sup>10</sup> For more on this jurist, see (Sheibani 2020).

(furū), the Qawā'id is one of the first works to tackle the notion of "objectives" (maqāṣid al-sharīah). It does this by indexing specific legal issues based on the welfare (maṣlaḥah) versus the harm (mafsadah) done to God's creation.

In a section called "A Rule on Clarifying Sole Rights and Shared Rights" (Qā'idah fī bayān al-ḥuqūq al-ḫālīṣah wa-l-murakabbah), Ibn 'Abd al-Salām has a short but remarkable passage about the claims that animals have upon humans (Al-Sulamī 1991, vol. 1, p. 167; Al-Sulamī 2010, Part 1, pp. 223–24).<sup>11</sup> They include financial and other expenses to care for them, even after the animals have grown sick and give no benefit (bi-ḥaythu lā yantafi'u bihā). However, even as Ibn 'Abd al-Salām sympathizes with animals, he weighs their needs against those of humans, betraying a circumspection and "probabilism" typical of fiqh as a whole (Weiss 1998, p. xiii). In a longish section called, "On the Cases When Benefit is Found Together with Harm (Faṣl fī ijtimā' al-maṣāliḥ ma' al-mafāsīd)" (Al-Sulamī 1991, vol. 1, pp. 98–123; Al-Sulamī 2010, Part 1, pp. 130–55), he sizes up the relative merits and drawbacks in over 50 hypothetical situations, including several about animals (ibid. 1991, vol. 1, pp. 135–36, Numbers 10–12; ibid. 2010, Part 1, pp. 135–36). In Number 11, for example, he justifies eating "wild game" (al-ṣayd al-waḥshī) without proper ritual slaughter (al-dhabḥ), a situation normally prohibited by Islamic law. However, Ibn 'Abd al-Salām allows for it if circumstances make performing the slaughter difficult, and if people would benefit from the physical nourishment (lākin nahu jāza bi-l-ḥaraj 'inda ta'adhdhuri l-dhabdḥ li-maṣlaḥat taghdhiyat al-ajsād).

While Ibn 'Abd al-Salām's brand of counterbalancing humans versus animals is dominant within classical Islam, some groups deviated from this norm in their strong support for nonhuman justice, often as a cosmic principle. It is worth considering these cases for a moment as meaningful precursors and inter-texts to al-Ma'arrī. One of the most obvious—and controversial—was the doctrine of metempsychosis, tanāsukh, sometimes called "projection," burūz, namely the movement of souls from humans into animals after death, which seems to rule out doing violence to animals on ethical grounds. Many observers associated this doctrine with extremist (ghulāh) Shi'ites who rebelled against the early caliphs (Daniel Gimaret, "Tanāsukh," E12), but it could have prevailed among the first Mu'tazilīs, especially the disciples of Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām (d. 835 CE). In the Kitāb al-ḥayawān (Book of the Living), al-Jāhīz calls them aṣḥāb al-jahālāt, "those who deal in absurdities," and credits them with panpsychism, i.e., the belief that everything possesses reason and, therefore, moral responsibility, even stones, mountains, flies, and lice; the aṣḥāb al-jahālāt apparently went so far as to say that each of these communities had a prophet sent by God (Crone 2012a, pp. 34–39).<sup>12</sup> Al-Jāhīz himself scoffs at the claim, evoking objections raised by Stoicism and other prior schools who denied the intrinsic moral value of animals on the grounds that they lack reason (Lagerlund 2018, p. 759). Whether his reports do justice to these beliefs in reality, they were taken up later by heresiographers like al-Shahrastānī (Walker 1991).

As an aside on al-Jāhīz, although he dismisses panpsychic beliefs as false, he does have a section in Kitāb al-ḥayawān called "Disputing the Slaughter and Killing of Animals" (ḥijāj fī dhabḥ al-ḥayawān wa-qatlihi) (Al-Jāhīz 1938, pp. 427–36).<sup>13</sup> Addressed to a notional group of objectors who claim that Islam permits them to kill and eat animals, al-Jāhīz offers a rebuttal based on the principle of mercy, which, as al-Jāhīz puts it, "Is all of a piece [al-raḥmah shakl wāḥid]: whoever shows no mercy to the dog, also shows none to the gazelle; whoever shows none to the gazelle, shows none to the goat;

<sup>11</sup> The passage on animals comes near the end of this section and the beginning of the next "On Classification of Rights into Unequal, Equal, and Disputed" (Faṣl fī inqisām al-ḥuqūq ilā al-mutafāwiṭ wa-l-mutasāwī wa-l-mukhtalaf fīhi) (Al-Sulamī 1991, vol. 1, p. 168; Al-Sulamī 1991, part 1, p. 225).

<sup>12</sup> Al-Jāhīz ascribes a number of unorthodox opinions to these aṣḥāb al-jahālāt, by whom he also meant the Jahmiyyah, that is, followers of slain theologian Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 745 CE). He shows them, for instance, promoting extreme voluntarism, namely a denial of inherent differences between physical objects, since the only real difference lies in God's will. Supposedly the aṣḥāb al-jahālāt held to his view against al-Nazzām's doctrine of "latency," al-kumūn, which says that traits like wetness, dryness, heat, and saltiness inhere in the objects themselves. The logical conclusion of the Jahmiyyah viewpoint, at least as recounted by al-Jāhīz, is that, "apart from God, nothing really exists" (Crone 2012a, p. 29).

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Geert Jan van Gelder for this reference.

whoever shows none to the sparrow, shows none to the human boy. Small and simple things lead to bigger ones [wa-ṣiḡhār al-umūr tu'addī ilā kibārihā]" (ibid., p. 428).

Returning to the doctrine of metempsychosis, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE, this doctrine found a beachhead within millenarian movements in the Islamic East. The Nuḡṭavīs or "Dottists" openly promoted a materialist-reincarnationist worldview (Amanat 1996; Babayan 2002, pp. 57–117), while the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great (d. 1605 CE) installed a cult that worshipped his person as divine and professed metempsychosis, and, by extension, vegetarianism (Moin 2012, pp. 130–69; Crone 2012b). Many occultist thinkers, physicians, and advisers to Persian-Turco-Mongol rulers believed in reincarnation but equivocated in public for fear of being tarnished as kuffār. Among their numbers were Sayyid Ḥusayn Akhlāṭī (d. 1397 CE), the personal physician to Mamluk sultan al-Malik al-zāhir Barqūq (r. 1382–99 CE), and Akhlāṭī's disciples Ibn Turka (d. 1432 CE) and Badr al-Dīn of Simavna. While scholars once thought that the ideas of these men grew out of Jainism, emerging research shows that they were neo-Pythagoreans, especially since Pythagoras himself gave credit for his reincarnationist veganism to an ancient Persian sage: Zoroaster (Melvin-Koushki forthcoming, pp. 32–34). The problem of whether Hellenic or Indic currents supplied Islam with metempsychosis and related beliefs still breeds controversy (Crone 2012a, pp. 29–30).

To many thinkers, including al-Ma'arrī, the movement of souls reeked of another strange doctrine: the equation of reality with divinity, dubbed "unity of being," waḥdat al-wujūd, by Ibn 'Arabī's disciples (Ibn 'Arabī himself never used the term, calling it instead "real being," ḥaqq al-wujūd) (Chittick 2020). Strict monotheists thought that this was too close to pantheism, and, therefore, polytheism (shirk), to pay it any heed, but it rang true for Sufi devotees. Of significance to animal ethics are the pietistic stories that show Muslim holy men communing with lions, dogs, fish, and birds, since all of these creatures share in the divine essence.<sup>14</sup>

Many such stories are preserved in the Persian-language Tazkirat al-awliyā (Memoir of the Saints) by poet and mystic Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 1221 CE). There, one reads about Khorasan-born jurist Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 778 CE) and the "compassion that he had for all of God's creatures" (az shafaqat kih ū-rā būd bar khalq-i khudāy). In one anecdote, Sufyān frees a caged bird, which then visits him every night and eventually dashes itself to the ground following Sufyān's death and burial rather than live without him ('Aṭṭār 1905–1907, vol. 1, pp. 195–96; 'Aṭṭār 1966, pp. 169–70). Ibrāhīm al-Khawwāṣ (d. 903 CE), a figure known for advocating "self-abandonment" (tawakkul) (Leonard Lewisohn "Tawakkul," EI2), narrates in the first person about how he rescued a lion by healing its injured paw, after which the lion returned wagging its tail, bringing along its grateful cub (bachchah-i ū) and a round breadloaf (gardah) for the holy man ('Aṭṭār 1905–1907, vol. 2, p. 149; 'Aṭṭār 1966, pp. 169–70). Speaking of lions, legends about Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896 CE), recount that lions, dogs, and other wild beasts freely visited him, and that he would feed and take care of them. For this reason, according to 'Aṭṭār, when a Sufi disciple once asked to come see him, he cautioned, "If you're afraid of lions, then don't spend time with me (agar tu az sibā mī-tarsi bā man ṣuḡbat madār) ('Aṭṭār 1905–1907, vol. 1, p. 267; 'Aṭṭār 1966, p. 204). Such Franciscan tales tie together a strand running throughout philosophies like Sufi animism or Turco-Persian reincarnationism, namely that animals stand as moral exemplars. One sees al-Ma'arrī tugging at this thread to weave his own defense of animals.

### 3. Animals in Al-Ma'arrī's Works

Throughout his career, al-Ma'arrī looks to be a committed stalwart for animals. Many of the poems in his later collection Luzūm mā lā yalzam (Self-Imposed Necessity) plump for them unequivocally, though typically en route to condemning humans for cruelty or lack of scruple. On this idea, despite an outwardly greater focus on animals as subjects in their own right, he retains the anthropocentrism of

<sup>14</sup> Written texts as well as visual artworks also show angels in animal form—lions, bulls, roosters, peacocks, and so on (Burge 2009, pp. 102–4; Gruber 2018, pp. 23, 128–30).

texts that use animals to discuss good human society, like *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, translated to Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa', or the *Al-Namir wa-l-tha'lab* (The Leopard and the Fox) of Sahl ibn Hārūn (d. 830 CE), director of the bayt al-ḥikmah and a staunch shu'ūbiyyah partisan, that is, a champion of non-Arabs and especially Persians in an Arab-dominant society.<sup>15</sup> That al-Ma'arrī uses animals to comment on humans brings up the question as to whether and how far one should take his interest in nonhumans at face value.

In one poetic couplet, for example, al-Ma'arrī wants above all to prosecute his own kind as base and evil. To do this, he compares them unfavorably to wild birds, who do not indulge the same cruelties as people (meter: ṭawīl) (*Al-Ma'arrī 1891–1895*, vol. 2, p. 25; *Aṭṭār 1905–1907*, p. 202 in English, p. 287 in Arabic):

Taṣaddaq 'alā l-ṭayri l-ghawādī bi-sharbatin/  
 mina l-māi wa-'dud'hā aḥaqqā mina l-insī  
 Fa-mā jinsuhā jānin 'alayka adhiyyatan/  
 bi-ḥālin idhā mā khifta min dhālika l-jinsī  
 Donate sips of water to birds, gone by morning,  
 and count them worthier of alms than men:  
 their kind commits you no harm at all,  
 even as you fear it from your own

Or in another poem, warning of death like so much of zuhd discourse, al-Ma'arrī says that it is only right for fate to be silent and callous—humans themselves cannot keep from being so reticent about their grisly treatment of animals (meter: khafīf) (*Al-Ma'arrī 1891–1895*, vol. 1, p. 58; *Al-Baṭalyawsi 1991*, p. 67):

Wa-wajadtu l-zamāna a'jama fazzan/  
 wa-jubārun fī ḥukmihā l-'ajmāū  
 I found fate tongue-tied, bereft of mercy,  
 while the dumb beast's blood goes unavenged.

If a wrongfully wounded beast remains as jubār, “unavenged, unretaliated” (*Lane 1984*, vol. 1, p. 377)<sup>16</sup>—a state of affairs for which humans are to blame, as al-Ma'arrī seems to imply—then it faces cruelty for no reason. Why, then, should humans expect such a reason when faced with their own looming, cruel demise? That they are found, in al-Ma'arrī's calculus, morally lacking compared to animals recalls Plutarch's imagined chat between Odysseus and Gryllus, one of the crewmen whom Circe changed into swine, and who, still in his porcine state, lists dozens of ways in which animals prove more virtuous than people—“for without command or instruction, 'unsown and unploughed,' it were, [the souls of beasts] naturally bring forth and develop such virtue as is proper in each case” (*Plutarch 1927–2004*, vol. 12, pp. 501–31, at 501).

Other works by al-Ma'arrī pose such troubling questions, or at least, they paint vividly colored tableaux from a nonhuman—and conspicuously pacifist and vegan—perspective. In the *Risālat al-ghufrān*, where al-Ma'arrī repeatedly lampoons overly literalistic visions of heaven—e.g., *dajāj al-raḥmah*, “fat chickens of mercy,” or *farārīj al-khuld*, “pullets of Eternity” (*Al-Ma'arrī 2013–2014*, vol. 1, pp. 206–7)—the narrative shows birds led to slaughter without pain, or gazelles hunted and killed without suffering. In fact, these creatures get replenished day after day so that their predators need not suffer privation, either (*ibid.*, pp. 244–45).

<sup>15</sup> (*Sahl 1973*). For more on his life and times, see Mohsen Zakeri, “Sahl ibn Hārūn,” *EI2*.

<sup>16</sup> Lane quotes a saying of the Prophet, *jurḥ al-'ajmā' jubārun*, “The wound of the speechless beast is a thing for which no retaliation, nor expiatory mulct is extracted” (*ibid.*; *Al-Bukhārī 2002*, “Kitāb al-diyāt,” p. 1709, #6913; *Al-Nīsābūrī 1991*, vol. 3, “Kitāb al-ḥudūd,” pp. 1334–35, #1710; *Al-Shāfi'ī 2001*, vol. 10, “Bāb jurḥ al-'ajmā' jubārun,” pp. 315–17) (thanks to Geert Jan van Gelder for the *ḥadīth* and al-Shāfi'ī references). This is almost certainly an unstated allusion of al-Ma'arrī's line.

In the alleged Qurān parody *Al-Fuṣūl wa-l-ghāyāt*, at the start of the chapter rhyming in *bā*, for example, al-Ma'arrī singles out proverbially industrious insects, like the common honeybee (*al-jārisah*, “buzzer”) or the psyche moth bagworm (*al-surfah*, Psyche quadrangularis<sup>17</sup>), to show that the structures they build are worthier than human-made products like wine or weapons (*Al-Ma'arrī 1938*, pp. 39–40). In his chancery style guide *Iḥkām ṣan'at al-kalām* (Perfecting the Craft of Prose Speech), Andalusī vizier 'Abd al-Ghafūr al-Kalāī (d. 1148 CE) quotes animal fables that he claims are salvaged from al-Ma'arrī's lost *Kitāb al-qā'if* (Book of the Tracker). They include tales of a lion who turns to veganism, or of an ant brought close to death, and who, when its fellows fret for the sake of its soul, soothes them with talk of an eternal reward—“and this, since I never once spilled another's blood” (*wa-dhālika annī lam asfik al-dam qaṭṭ*) (*Al-Kalāī 1985*, pp. 204–6).

The closest thing to a Ma'arrīan treatise on animal ethics are his exchange of letters with the Cairo-based Fatimid Shi'ite missionary al-Mu'ayyad fī l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 1078 CE) (*Al-Ma'arrī 1982*, pp. 83–140; *Margoliouth 1902*).<sup>18</sup> In what one could call a public relations maneuver—a learned debate put on display to garner intellectual and spiritual converts—al-Mu'ayyad asks al-Ma'arrī to explain a poem in which the latter comes down against animal products of any kind, including fish, milk, and honey.<sup>19</sup> The real question, however, is why al-Ma'arrī went in for the vegan life at all, since, as reviewed in the first section, mainstream Islamic though allows people to eat meat.<sup>20</sup>

Al-Ma'arrī's answer revolves around a hub of divine justice. Replying to al-Mu'ayyad's charge that anyone practicing veganism tries to outdo God in mercy, since Islam condones using animal products, he hints provocatively that the God of Islamic tradition is less merciful than reason suggests. “The prophets recall, peace be upon them, that The Creator—exalted be His strength—is gracious and merciful (*ra'ūf raḥīm*).”<sup>21</sup> However, we see evidence to the contrary: if He is merciful to the Sons of Adam, then He must also show mercy to other living beings (*aṣnāf al-ḥayawān*), which suffer pain in the slightest thing” (*Al-Ma'arrī 1982*, pp. 109–12, at p. 110). However, God does let animals suffer, says al-Ma'arrī, as when a lion preys on weaker flesh, or when humans steal cow calves to eat them as veal. How can one therefore credit Him with mercy?

Lest al-Ma'arrī court charges of unbelief (*kufr*) or atheism (*ilḥād*) for calling God's pity into question, he defends vegan practice on agnostic grounds: the question of evil in this world is what poses the true mystery (*sirr khafiyy*), not God's compassion (*ibid.*, p. 105). Lacking more certainty about where evil comes from, including the evil of animal cruelty, “those who profess religion have always been anxious to avoid meat, since it cannot be obtained without harm to a living creature” (*wa-lam yazal man yantasibu ilā al-dīn yarghabu fī hijrān al-luḥūm li-annahā lā yūṣalu ilayhā illā bi-l-īlām li-ḥayawān*) (*ibid.*, p. 107). By offering his zoocentric counsels, al-Ma'arrī departs from a more human-centered thinker like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE), who writes of the purifying effects of hunger on the human soul—including heightened spiritual “insight” (*baṣīrah*)—in the section “*Kitāb kasr al-shahwatayn*” (On Breaking the Two Desires, i.e., overeating and sexual desire) from *Iḥyā' ulūm al-dīn* (*Winter 1995*, trans., pp. 117–32).

Where did al-Ma'arrī come by his beliefs? The question has bedeviled observers for centuries. Without evidence to the contrary, al-Ma'arrī's tendency toward compassion may have been a natural

<sup>17</sup> Found in the grasslands and deserts of Central and Southwestern Asia, bagworms are known proverbially in Arabic for industriousness due to their oddly distinctive log cabin cocoon: *aṣna' min al-surfah* (craftier than a bagworm). The cocoon is often made with twigs from the saxaul tree (*al-rimthi*) and is known colloquially as *mukḥulat al-dhib*, “the wolf's antimony jar,” since it appears in the branches of far-off trees, familiar only to wolves (*Ibn Manẓūr 1999*, vol. 6, pp. 244–45).

<sup>18</sup> For a fuller study of these letters with respect to veganism, see (*Blankinship 2019b*).

<sup>19</sup> The complete poem can be found in Arabic at (*Al-Ma'arrī 1891–1895*, vol. 1, pp. 232–34); and in English at (*Blankinship 2019b*, pp. 284–87).

<sup>20</sup> The Qurān endorses humankind's profiting from animals as a natural resource, whether of flesh and milk (e.g., 23/*al-Mu'minūn*: 21–2), wool, fur, and skin (e.g., 16/*al-Nahl*: 80), or prowess in hunting (e.g. 5/*al-Mā'idah*: 4).

<sup>21</sup> This verbiage comes directly from the Qurān, e.g., Q 2/*Al-Baqarah* 143, *inna llāha bi-l-nāsi la-ra'ūfun raḥīmūn* (“Truly God is All-gentle with the people, All-compassionate,” *Arberry 1955*, vol. 1, p. 46); Q 9/*Al-Tawbah* 128, *bi-l-mu'minīna ra'ūfun raḥīmūn* (“gentle to the unbelievers, compassionate,” *ibid.*, p. 223).

one. Blind from childhood and having lost both parents before middle age, he seems deeply affected by life's tragedies, if his statements to al-Mu'ayyad fī l-Dīn—made at the very end of al-Ma'arrī's life—describing physical and emotional suffering are any indicator. That believing Arab-Muslim authors in many eras faced their own hardships and still did not voluntarily avoid animal products reinforces the point. In addition, due to al-Ma'arrī's 18-month sojourn in Baghdad, many commentators single out Indo-Persian origins as an influence. However, this is less likely when one considers that al-Ma'arrī himself attacks Hindu beliefs—especially reincarnation, of which more below—in *Risālat al-ghufrān*, as well as what he sees as an abhorrent practice: *satī* or widow burning.<sup>22</sup> As for pre-Islamic Persian creeds, in his first letter to al-Mu'ayyad, al-Ma'arrī explicitly mentions—and rebuffs—Manichaeism as the answer to the problem of evil and as grounds for vegetarianism, as did Augustine before him in *The City of God* (Al-Ma'arrī 1982, p. 106; Augustine 1957, book 1, p. 20).

Another imaginable yet little discussed channel for vegetarian belief in medieval Islamdom was the Hellenic one. Al-Ma'arrī lived at a time of religious ferment in Byzantium, less than a hundred miles to the northwest and which some biographers say he visited in his youth.<sup>23</sup> Especially conspicuous in that realm was what Dmitri Obolensky called Balkan neo-Manichaeism, flourishing from the tenth to fifteenth centuries CE and whose forerunners had been hounded as heretics under Justinian II in the seventh (Obolensky 1948, p. 27). It spanned a number of groups, such as the Paulicians, the Massalians, and the Blakhermites, but above all the Bogomils, a dualist, vegetarian sect denounced by Cosmas the Priest in the tenth century CE (not to be confused with Cosmas I or II, both subsequent patriarchs of Constantinople) (ibid., p. 104).<sup>24</sup>

Some of this Manichaean tumult might have fueled al-Ma'arrī's thinking, but his distinctly zoocentric approach, fixated on sparing God's creatures from suffering, parts ways with the Byzantine dualists, who based their ideas on the permanent struggle between spirit and matter and the moral superiority of the former. Thus, even if Bogomilism fired up the engine of al-Ma'arrī's thought, he would have ultimately taken it down a different path. Still, it is clear enough that al-Ma'arrī knew of canonized Greek medical authorities like Galen,<sup>25</sup> who had suggested restricting one's meat intake for better health (Al-Ma'arrī 1982, p. 111; Margoliouth 1902, p. 319).

Given the history of building vegetarian practices atop a reincarnationist groundwork, it seems crucial to ask: did al-Ma'arrī think that human souls migrated after death? If so, then he convincingly hid any such views.<sup>26</sup> In fact, judging by the poetry of Saqṭ al-zand, he knew about—and dismissed as false—the doctrine of metempsychosis from an early age, maybe even before his trip to Baghdad circa 1007 CE. In *Qaṣīdah Number Five*, following the chronology of Ḥusayn et al., al-Ma'arrī answers a poem by a certain Shi'ite notable (sharīf 'Alawī) called Abū Ibrāhīm Mūsā ibn Ishāq. With memorable disdain, the line in question plays on this Abū Ibrāhīm's name in order to invalidate his belief in reincarnation (meter: wāfir) (Al-Ma'arrī 1945, vol. 1, p. 276, line #51; Al-Jundī 1962–1964, vol. 3, p. 1337):

Wa-law ṣaḥḥa l-tanāsukhu kunta Mūsā/  
wa-kāna abūka Ishāqa l-dhabīḥā

<sup>22</sup> “Those who have witnessed Indians practice self-immolation (*man shahida ṭhrāqahum nufūsaḥum*) tell that when they feel the fire burning they want to get out, but those present push them back with sticks and sharpened swords. There is no god but God; << You have done a monstrous thing!>> [quoting Q 19/Maryam, v. 89]” (Al-Ma'arrī 2013–2014, vol. 2, pp. 80–83).

<sup>23</sup> Ibn al-Adīm writes that al-Ma'arrī went to Antioch (Ḥusayn et al. 1944, pp. 555–56), while Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qifṭī says he visited Latakia (Al-Qifṭī 1950, vol. 1, p. 49). Even though such details differ, the biographers who mention this episode all agree that al-Ma'arrī traveled beyond Greater Syria in his youth, and that the trip affected his worldview.

<sup>24</sup> In the twelfth-century Byzantine historical epic *The Alexiad*, at the back half of Book 14 and the middle of Book 15, Princess Anna Komnene (d. 1153 CE) exposes various dualist offshoots for the perceived threat they posed. She calls the Bogomils “a serpent lurking in its hole” and describes how, like a viper, their ideas had slithered into small towns and villages, taking hold especially among the peasants (Komnene 1969, pp. 455–63).

<sup>25</sup> For more on Galen as a canonical source of Byzantine medicine, see (Nutton 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Muḥammad Salīm al-Jundī rolls out statements by al-Ma'arrī on a number of theological positions, especially those for which he was charged with unorthodox views. (Al-Jundī 1962–1964, vol. 3, pp. 1398–487). Even though al-Jundī seems eager to defend al-Ma'arrī, he adds up enough evidence to show that al-Ma'arrī was not a convinced reincarnationist.

If the doctrine of reincarnation were right,  
 then you'd be Moses (Mūsā)  
 and your father Isaac (Ishāq) the Slain!

Later in his career, al-Ma'arrī still thought that certain Shi'ite groups— as well as Hindus and the followers of murdered Sufi al-Ḥallāj (d. 922 CE)—believed in metempsychosis. He writes in *Risālat al-ghufrān* that:

This sect [al-niḥlah, referring to al-Ḥallāj and his disciples] propagates the idea of metempsychosis [al-tanāsukh], which is an ancient belief held by the Indians [ahl al-hind]. It has also become common among a group of Shi'ites [jamā'ah min al-shī'ah]. We ask God for success and protection (Al-Ma'arrī 2013–2014, pp. 78–79).<sup>27</sup>

That al-Ma'arrī puts reincarnation squarely in India belies sophisticated contemporary knowledge—above all by the Persian traveler and polymath Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1050 CE)—of non-Indic and especially Hellenic writings on metempsychosis (Walker 1991, pp. 220–22).<sup>28</sup> In addition, given the fact that al-Ma'arrī was regularly accused of heterodox belief in “Brahmanism” (al-barhamiyyah) for his vegan lifestyle<sup>29</sup>; and given the fact that he thought, as others did, that some Shi'ites believed in reincarnation, it is remarkable that neither he nor al-Mu'ayyad fī l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī charged each other more vehemently with such beliefs.

One might think that by snubbing these different groups, al-Ma'arrī was just “writing between the lines,” that is, concealing his unorthodox views for fear of being persecuted (Strauss 1941, p. 490). This possibility again brings up the question: how far should readers take his concern for animals at face value? However, most of the time, he is quite pleased to trumpet his thoughts, plus the fact that his disdain for Sufis, Hindus, and extremist Shi'ites stays consistent throughout his writings. Short of equating literary discourse with reality, it is safe to assume that he in fact disavowed these ideas as he claims. In addition, as noted, the content itself—being the main way to know how he got his ideas, short of new evidence coming to light—is not enough to tell which sources inspired him. Several are possible, especially Balkan neo-Manichean groups like the Bogomils; Iranian breakaways from Zoroastrianism like the Khurramīs or neo-Mazdakīs (Babayan 2002, esp. pp. 137–54, 262–92); Indic religion as conveyed by medicine; or some blend of these.<sup>30</sup> But the details of his thought depart enough from any single point of supply as to rule it out as the only one. The best one can do is to orient him to other thinkers and texts, as the preceding sketch tries to do.

Perhaps the weightier influences on his thinking are lost to history. Returning again to the trip to Baghdad or the childhood stay in Byzantine lands, it is unlikely that new evidence will emerge of conversations with travelers, chance encounters with eccentric folk beliefs, and so forth. Nor should one overstate claims about the past without a basis in historical data. However, to discount the possibility that undocumented conversations or encounters made their way into al-Ma'arrī's worldview would mean over-textualizing a past that often evades written capture.<sup>31</sup> As Thomas Glick says regarding Christian–Muslim cultural transfer on the Iberian peninsula, “of all the processes of acculturation, non-formal cultural diffusion is perhaps the most important” (Glick 1979, p. 152). Therefore, so too might al-Ma'arrī have seen, heard, or read things for which no trace remains. Perhaps he did indeed absorb Indic or Hellenic injunctions against animal harm, or, on the other hand, perhaps he happened to meet a single individual with similar ethical concerns. Together with his apparently inborn awareness

<sup>27</sup> As Kathryn Babayan points out, the Sufi belief in *wahdat al-wujūd*—which here al-Ma'arrī conflates with metempsychosis—was, at least in the mind of heresiographers, shared by Iranian neo-Pythagorean movements like the Nuḡṭāvis.

<sup>28</sup> Nor is this for al-Bīrūnī's lack of knowledge about the Indic tradition, reckoning by his commentary on yoga philosophical texts (Al-Bīrūnī 2020).

<sup>29</sup> For examples of such accusations, see (Al-Jundī 1962–1964, vol. 1, pp. 406–9).

<sup>30</sup> Recent research casts doubt on some of the stark lines that have been by scholars between Hellenic and Indian thought, judging from centuries of direct contact between the two (Stoneman 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Many thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting further discussion on this point.

of nonhuman suffering and a strongly felt sense of justice, there are unlikelier explanations than these for how al-Ma'arrī came by his convictions.

#### 4. Shocked to the Point of Compassion

As stated, the action of the Ṣāhil—such as it is—unfolds as one animal after another passes by the waterwheel-bound mule (al-shāḥij) and asks about its plight. The mule, in turn, falls on these passersby to carry a plea to the governor of Aleppo, 'Azīz al-Dawlah, since it suffers daily beatings at the hands of a “lazy day laborer” (ajīr kaslān) (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, p. 98). This scenario already betrays a concern for animal welfare, although Pieter Smoor's judgment that the mule in fact represents al-Ma'arrī suggests that readers should not draw neat correspondences, at least not in this section (Smoor 1981, pp. 57–61).

Instead, where one finds the thinnest veneer between literary discourse and what must be al-Ma'arrī's actual view is the first monologue of the horse, the titular ṣāhil, “neigher” (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, pp. 108–65). The mule begs it for help delivering a message to 'Azīz al-Dawlah by appealing to biological relations, calling the horse “brother of my mother” (yā khālī) (ibid., p. 96). This appeal by the horse rejects in typical Ma'arrīan fashion, that is, with a long list of homonyms or near homonyms—many of them animal names—that refer to different things despite sounding or looking the same, such as the clan of Dhīb within the Azd tribe, versus the wolf (dhīb) that “schemes evil plots” (yahtabilu bi-jaddin naṭīḥin) (ibid., pp. 110–13, at p. 112). The point is that language can deceive, as when the mule calls the horse “uncle” despite there being no such relation, at least from the horse's perspective. “So don't let names dupe you,” it chides the mule— “before someone observed the lightning, the sky was already there” (qabl al-shā'im kānat al-samā) (ibid., p. 113).

Then the horse goes to work on the second part of the mule's plea: the fact that it wants help from a human, 'Azīz al-Dawlah. “Don't you know that the Sons of Adam are the sovereigns of the earth? [mulūk al-arḍ] . . . As for us, we are the tribes of equus (ma'āshir al-jabhah). Hardships [ghamarāt] are thrown upon our necks and attacks [ghārāt] are put upon our backs” (ibid., p. 115). There ensues a litany of evils inflicted upon animals by humans, a litany which, despite the horse's aim of logically proving that humans are not trustworthy, is vivid and disturbing enough that the intended shock to readers becomes its own form of argument.

For instance, time and time again, the horse reminds the mule that domesticated animals form bonds with humans, only for the humans to betray those bonds and kill them. “What about cows that till the ground? [al-muthīrāt al-kawārib]” it asks rhetorically. “Humans use them, and then they eat them!” (ibid., p. 128). When a bull's flesh is sufficiently marbled with fat (lammā shurija laḥm Abī l-Muzāḥim bi-l-nayy<sup>32</sup>), it is taken to market and carved up, setting aside the erstwhile society between man and beast (ibid., p. 130). Ranchers give food to chickens not out of sympathy, but rather to dupe them into sticking their necks into a trap (al-siṭa) (ibid., pp. 128–29). However, this is not all, continues the horse: wild animals (al-waḥsh al-bāhilah) suffer no less than do tame ones (al-bahā'im al-ahliyyah). It recalls goats ascending up a mountain (al-aw'āl al-āqilah), whom hunters paralyze (fa-qa'adūhā) by shooting their haunches, then take them for food and leave their orphaned young (ghufr waqil) (ibid., p. 140). When wild jennies (al-ānāt) make a loud commotion (al-jarabbah), it is not enough scare off hunters from killing them (ibid., p. 134). Further, with ostriches, people will stab them and steal their eggs for food (ibid., p. 144), and so on with many different species, including rabbits, foxes, lizards, jerboas, bees, and even snakes and mice, which some sources say the Bedouin would eat (ibid. pp. 151–53).

<sup>32</sup> The word for fat, *nayy*, “raw” or “untouched by fire,” is originally written *nay*. Traditionally, desert Arabs distinguished fat as an uncooked substance from flesh, sometimes called *naḍīj*, “cooked” (Lane 1984, vol. 2, supplement, p. 2930). *Abū l-Muzāḥim*, or sometimes *Ibn al-Muzāḥim* or simply *muzāḥim*, “fighter,” can by association mean a raging elephant or, in this context, a bull with broken horns (*munkasir al-qarnayn*, reading *munkasir* for *munkar* in the text) (Ibn Manzūr 1999, vol. 6, p. 29).

Of the more ghoulish practices recalled by the horse, certain Bedouin tribes would supposedly waterlog their camels over ten days before a long desert journey, letting them fill their humps on the first day, then starving them of water for another eight days, and finally letting them drink again on the tenth day—as al-Ma'arrī says, *ḡammaū al-ibl 'ishran* (“they thirsted their camels for a ten-day period [eight days without water]”; Lane 1984, vol. 2, p. 2103). Then, when all the water had run out and circumstances in the barren wastes grew dire, they would rip open the camel’s stomach and drink the excess water (*baqarū buṭūnahā fa-sharibū al-fazz*).<sup>33</sup>

In the voice of the horse, al-Ma'arrī quotes several poets who allude to this practice, at least in the horse’s (and probably al-Ma'arrī’s) estimation. For example, here is line 49 from a *mufaḡḡaliyyah* in the *basīṭ* meter by 'Alqamah ibn 'Abadah “al-Fahl” (fl. mid-sixth cen. CE) (Al-Ḍabbī 1921, vol. 1, p. 818, poem #120; vol. 2, p. 337):

Wa-ḡad uṣāḡhibu aḡwāman ṭa āmuhumū  
khuḡḡru l-mazādi wa-laḡmun fihi tanshīmū

And time was that I went around with a people<sup>34</sup> whose diet  
is the dark-hued water of provision bags, and rank, fetid meat.

Most commentators,<sup>35</sup> including al-Anbārī (ibid.), understand the phrase *khuḡḡru l-mazādī* to mean either water pouches, normally made of goatskin, in which the water is covered by algae, or else stomachs (*kurūsh*) removed from animals and used as water bladders. Regarding the strange color, Ibn Manḡūr explains that “the water has remained a long time in the waterskins and thus gone green/darkened<sup>36</sup> with age” (*inna l-mā baḡiyat fi l-adāwī fa-khḡarrat min al-ḡidam*) (Ibn Manḡūr 1999, vol. 14, p. 152). The stomachs may also contain meat, as Ibn Qutaybah says about the word *tanshīm* (“rotting,” “putrefaction”): “Whenever the desert Arabs went military campaigns and crossed long distances, they would carve up meat and stow it in an animal’s stomach [used as a provision bag]; and after many days, the meat would go bad, and this is [the meaning of] ‘its rotting’” (*kānū idhā ḡhazaw wa-sāfarū ḡaṭa ū l-laḡm fa-ja'alūhu fi kirsh fa-idhā atā 'alayhi ayyām taghayyara fa-dhālika tanshīmuh*) (Ibn Qutaybah 1953, vol., 3, pp. 381–82; Al-Baṭalyawṣī 2008, vol. 1, p. 387). However, the horse in al-Ma'arrī’s story quotes 'Alqamah’s line because it thinks—or it wants readers to think—that it is about slaughtering camels in order to consume their stomach content. This demonstrates al-Ma'arrī’s method of creatively reinterpreting well-known passages to fit his pacifist, zoocentric message, although at least one commentator, al-Akhfash al-Aṣḡhar, does support al-Ma'arrī’s understanding of the line by 'Alqamah (Al-Akhfash 1999, p. 643).<sup>37</sup> More on such interpretive somersaults by al-Ma'arrī in the next section.

<sup>33</sup> In literature, disemboweling and the like seems emblematic of a particularly gruesome death. In his *Brains Confounded by the Ode of Abū Shādūf Expounded* (*Hazz al-ḡuḡūf bi-sharḡ ḡaṣīd Abī Shādūf*), seventeenth-century Egyptian author Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī (d. ca. 1700 CE) includes an anecdote about a wolf cub raised on the milk of a ewe, which it then eviscerates (Al-Shirbīnī 2016, vol. 1, pp. 40–41); and about a hyena raised by a Bedouin man, whose stomach the hyena later rips open (ibid.). Apart from highlighting the starkness of the violence, these stories are meant as evidence that humans, like animals, “will not escape their inborn nature” (*lā yakḡruju al-insān min ṭab ihi*, ibid., pp. 38–39).

<sup>34</sup> There is a variant reading of the first hemistich: *Wa-ḡad uṣāḡhibu fityānan ṭa āmuhumu*, “and time was that I went with young warriors [geared for raiding] whose food was” etc.

<sup>35</sup> Many thanks to Geert Jan van Gelder for checking my understanding of this line, and for suggesting the various references that appear in this paragraph.

<sup>36</sup> *Khuḡḡr* can mean green, but also brown or black in classical Arabic—presumably this refers to how the water was colored by the dark contents of their stomachs, but possibly also bile (this seems less likely).

<sup>37</sup> “Whenever the desert Arabs rode through a barren wasteland, i.e. one without moisture, they would give water to a sturdy camel, then pierce its snout [to bind it] so that it could not chew its cud. Then, when thirst overtook them, they would puncture the camel’s upper chest and drink whatever water was in its stomach. The name of that water is *fazz*, ‘pressed-out’” (*kānū idhā rakibū mafāzatan jardā, ay lā mā fiḡā, arwaw ba'iran thumma jaḡdhū mashāfirahu li-allā yajitarr, fa-in ajhadahum al-'aṭash naharūhu wa-sharibū mā fi jawfiḡi min al-mā, wa-ism dhālika l-mā al-fazz*).

Going further, the horse character says that the Bedouin also used to open the veins of camels and drink their blood,<sup>38</sup> and that for the truly destitute, dead camel carrion offered relief from hunger. Again, poetry serves as proof of such horrors, with anonymous lines quoted in rajaz meter and with a tinge of black humor (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, p. 125):

Inna l-sa'ida man yamūtu jamaluh  
yakulu laḥman wa-yaqillu 'amaluh  
Happy is he whose camel dies, so he  
eats the meat, saves himself the work!<sup>39</sup>

The horse goes on to describe how humans wear out their camels with overmuch walking, or how, as in a poem attributed—incorrectly<sup>40</sup>—to Juwayriyah ibn Asmā' al-Fazārī, travelers slaughter their riding camels so that an attacking wolf will eat them instead of the humans (ibid., p. 126). With these examples at its command, the horse builds to a crescendo: “No animal has endured torture from the Sons of Eve like the camel has” (wa-mā ṣabara shay'un min al-bahā'im 'alā 'anat Banī Ḥawwā' mā ṣabarathu al-ibil) (ibid., p. 125).

This gallery of crimes echoes an earlier text to which al-Ma'arrī's Ṣāhil might owe a debt, however indirectly, in its display of human cruelty for the sake of persuading readers: The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn, by the Brethren of Purity. Throughout the trial, the spokesman of the beasts (za'im al-bahā'im) is in fact a mule (baghl), making for a conspicuous link between this work and al-Ma'arrī's.<sup>41</sup> The mule of the Brethren of Purity bemoans how humans have treated nonhumans from the earliest days (fī bad' al-khalq), driving them from their homes and enthralling them as beasts of burden (Ikhwān 1957, vol. 2, pp. 203–4; Goodman and McGregor 2009, pp. 99–100). Then, in the section “On the Animals' Complaint of Oppression by Humans” (Fī bayān shakāwat al-ḥayawān min jawr al-ins), readers find a long list of crimes that indict humans on their face.

“As for feeding and watering us,” charges the mule in Goodman and McGregor's English, “these things are not done out of kindness or compassion, as he [the human spokesman] claims, but for fear lest we die and lest they lose their investment in us and the benefits they take from us” (bal makhāfatan an nahlika fa-yakhsarū athmānanā wa-tafūtahum al-manāfi' minnā) (Ikhwān 1957, vol. 2, p. 215; Goodman and McGregor 2009, p. 116). Such alleged self-interest flouts the counsels of an author like Ibn 'Abd al-Salām to care for animals even when they give no direct benefit. Then, as if on cue, other animals take up the mule's mantle and chime in with their own objections. The ass (ḥimār) complains of being overburdened with bricks; the ox (thawr) protests being chained to human waterwheels and

<sup>38</sup> In his edition of Ibn al-Kalbī's *Kitāb al-aṣnām* (Book of Idols), Aḥmad Zakī Bāshā reproduces a marginal note from the unique Egyptian National Archives manuscript (Ibn al-Kalbī 1995, p. 3) explaining the phrase *inna llāha arāḥakum min al-sajjah wa-l-bajjah*, “God has given you respite [i.e. freed you] from the pagan god Sajjah and the practice of blood drinking.” The note glosses *al-sajjah* as “an idol once worshipped alongside Allāh” (*ṣanam kān yu'bad min dūn Allāh*), and *al-bajjah* as “phlebotomized blood which the desert Arabs would consume in times of crisis” (*al-faṣīd alladhī kānat al-'arab takulu fī l-azmah*). In his *Kitāb al-bukhālā* (Book of Misers), al-Jāḥiẓ mentions *majdūh*, a Bedouin “emergency dish” made of blood mixed with other things (Al-Jāḥiẓ 1948, pp. 216, 218; Al-Jāḥiẓ 1997, trans. Serjeant, pp. 195, 197; Ibn Durayd 1987–1988, vol. 1, p. 435). Thanks to Geert Jan van Gelder for the references in al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Durayd. Setting aside the question of historicity, such references show that, in the Arab popular imagination, opening the veins of mounts and pack animals was considered a standard tactic of Bedouin desert survival.

<sup>39</sup> Also appearing in the “*Kitāb al-ṭā'ām*” (Book of eats) of Ibn Qutaybah's *Uyūn al-akhbār* (Book of Choice Accounts) (Ibn Qutaybah 1996, vol. 3, p. 213).

<sup>40</sup> There is a confusion, as noted in (Ullmann 1981, p. 88, note 84), with the well-known poet Asmā' ibn Khārijah al-Fazārī (on whom see e.g., Sezgin 1974–1995, vol. 2, p. 329); Bint al-Shāṭi', editor of the *Ṣāhil*, did not notice this. Perhaps al-Ma'arrī misremembered; Ullmann thinks it is due to copyists. Ullmann gives all eighteen lines in transliteration, translation, and with extensive commentary (Ullmann 1981, pp. 87–96). The lines are from a poem by Asmā' ibn Khārijah (Aḥmad and Hārūn 1955, pp. 48–52). Many thanks to Geert Jan van Gelder for pointing out the misattribution and recommending these sources.

<sup>41</sup> Other talking mules in Arabic literature include the donkey-shaped jinn that appear in the fourth and final section of Ibn Shuhayd al-Andalusī's *Risālat al-Tawābī wa-l-zawābī* (The Treatise of following spirits and whirling demons) (Al-Andalusī 1967, “*Ḥayawān al-jinn*,” pp. 147–52), and in the *Thousand and One Nights* (Mahdi 1984–1994), the deceitful donkey of “*Hikāyat al-ḥimār wa-l-thawr*” (The Tale of the donkey and the ox) (*Thousand and One Nights*, Mahdi 1984–1994, vol. 1, pp. 66–69; Heller-Roazen 2010, pp. 13–15).

millstones (*dawālibihim wa-arḥiyatihim*); the ram (*kabsh*) resists having its kids stolen so that humans can eat them and steal their milk; the horse (*faras*) denounces being bridled and bitted; the rabbit (*arnab*) laments being hunted by dogs; and on and on. As in the *Ṣāhil*, such testimonies pile up with nearly physical force, pressing readers into the ironic position of siding with nonhumans against their own kind.

In the end, however, the pleas fall short of convincing the jinn king, who tosses out the animals' case. To account for the discrepancy between this result and the tale's overall egalitarian tenor, Tlili pits the Brethren's hierarchical worldview, which triumphs in the end, against an even-handed view of animals deriving from the Qurān (Tlili 2014). Of course, the result of the trial may be more complicated than this; the humans emerge victorious simply because a tiny number of them are saints, which leaves untouched the accusation that the vast majority of humans are worse than animals.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, al-Ma'arrī himself sides with his own horse character's verdict, if one gauges from the short, token rebuttal offered by the mule. It spends barely two edited pages—in patent contrast to its conversation partner's lengthy descant—quashing the horse's claims and pointing out human charity (*iḥsān*) before moving to the issue of whether some lines of poetry count as *rajaz* or not (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, pp. 173–75). While no explicit position is advanced, if one reads between the lines, there are differences of length, detail, and enthusiasm between the horse's talk and that of the mule that serve to confirm al-Ma'arrī's support for nonhuman justice.

## 5. From Poetic Myth to Zoocentric Reality

As the foregoing shows, literary discourse gets pressed into the service of arguments pro and contra during the horse's monologue, as it does throughout *Risālat al-Ṣāhil wa-l-shāhij*. Although a tried and true rhetorical move in classical Arabic—one which would be familiar even in the hypothetical text world of the *Ṣāhil*, a text world for which one assumes a basis in culturally Islamicate discursive genres—using poetry and maxims (*amthāl*) for historical, sociocultural, or rhetorical evidence is something that the horse still feels it needs to justify. “All of this represents more than enough desert Arab poetry to establish proofs [of my point],” it says defensively (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, pp. 134–35). “I only produce it here like a bearer of news showing you the sun [*kamā yushūru al-muḥaddith ilā Umm Shamlah*]<sup>43</sup>, or the night rider showing you the moon's halo” [*wa-yurīka rākibu laylihi al-sāhirah*]<sup>44</sup>—in other words, to show the mule, plus any eavesdroppers,<sup>44</sup> the source of its own ideas and the trajectory of its thought.

In particular, pre- and early Islamic hunting poetry enters the mix, especially *Hudhalī* verse, with its “depictions of animals, especially onagers and oryx, that are killed by hunters as representatives of the ineluctability of fate” (Miller 2016, p. 118). At one point, al-Ma'arrī's horse brings out nine lines of a 44-line poem by Sā'idah ibn Ju'ayyah,<sup>45</sup> a *mukhaḍram*—a poet whose life spanned before and after the coming of Islam—who, along with his *rāwī* (transmitter and pupil) Abū Dhū'ayb Khuwaylid ibn Khālid (d. ca. 649 CE), also a *mukhaḍram*, form a distinctive school among the *Hudhalīs*; according to Nathaniel Miller, they share common characteristics “in the depictions of rain storms, honey-collectors, vocabulary and stylistic devices like repetition” (*ibid.*, p. 312; see also pp. 377–79, 389–92).

<sup>42</sup> Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

<sup>43</sup> *Al-muḥaddith* normally carries the technical meaning of a *ḥadīth* transmitter. So it may here too, although the full Arabic statement is general enough not to mark it either way. *Umm Shamlah* is a nickname for the sun; it can also mean wine or, more generally, the world and its fleeting joys, “so called because compassing [*shamlah*] the intellect of a man and concealing it” (Lane 1984, vol. 1, p. 1610).

<sup>44</sup> In discourse analysis, sociologist Erving Goffman is credited with the distinction between “overhearers,” i.e. those who are privy—or potentially privy—to a conversation not directly “intended” for them, and “ratified participants,” namely those for whom a conversation is intended, whether or not they happen to be listening (Goffman 1981, pp. 124–59). Whatever one thinks about an author's ability to imagine future readers, if one assumes that there are readers whom the author has not thought of, but who may in fact one day read his works, then they could be described as overhearers.

<sup>45</sup> For more on this poet, see (Al-Sukkārī 1965, vol. 3, pp. 1095–185).

The lines in question—Numbers 8–16, with variant readings and line ordering in al-Sukkarī's recension (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, pp. 142–43; Al-Sukkarī 1965, vol. 3, pp. 1122–38)<sup>46</sup>—imagine a hunter taking down a curvhorned ibex (dhū ḥayadin, or dhū ḥiyadin in al-Sukkarī) on the side of a mountain. The ibex strays from its herd in search of Indian lilac (nīm, *Azadirachta indica*, also known as nimtree) and black henna (katam, *Buxus dioica*), neither of which it finds. Instead, it comes across a hunter, who capitalizes on the animal's distance from the herd:

Ḥattā utīḥa lahū rāmin bi-muḥdalatin/  
jashin wa-bīḍin nawāḥīhinna ka l-sajamī<sup>47</sup>

Dallā yadayhi lahū qaṣran<sup>48</sup> fa-alzamaḥū/  
naffāḥatan ghayra ikhtāin<sup>49</sup> wa-lā sharamī

Fa-jāla minhu bi-a lā l-raydi thumma kabā/  
'alā naḍiyyin khilāla l-jawfi<sup>50</sup> munḥaṭimī

Then fate decreed a shooter with a delicate, well-worn bow  
and white arrows whose blades are like willow leaves.<sup>51</sup>

He hung his hands from above, to let fly with utmost power (qaṣran),  
then dealt it a bloodspattering shaft, nor flying amiss  
nor merely grazing skin.

The ibex fled the high mountain ridge, then fell forward  
onto the bare bolt, which pierced its gut through to the ribs.

In these lines, later Arabic commentators saw the human-centered fatalism so familiar to pre-Islamic verse. Even the pre-Islamic and mukhaḍram poets themselves felt this way, a fact that can be discerned from the case of Abu Dhūayb, the pupil of Sā'idah, who expanded his mentor's themes into the single most celebrated Hudhalī poem: an elegy to his five sons who died of plague within a single year, and in which the tragic abruptness of their fate is likened to wild asses (jawn, "humpbacked," and jadāid, "plump [she-asses]") killed by a hunter's bow and arrow; a lone oryx (shabab) attacked by hounds; and two champion warriors (sing. kamiyy, pl. kumāt) who slay each other in battle (Jones 2011, pp. 493–524).

However, in al-Ma'arrī's hands, the creatures killed by hunters become revived subjects per se, with their poems as evidence of the harm that humans do. More than that, al-Ma'arrī often assumes that the harms described by poetry are real— "There is no doubt that this is still done even today" (wa-lā rayba annahu yuf alu ilā al-yawm) (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, p. 137). In this sense, he reverses the

<sup>46</sup> Lines 8, 15, and 16 occupy the same order in both the *Ṣāhil* and al-Sukkarī. Lines 9, 10, 12, and 13 in the *Ṣāhil* are, respectively, lines 10, 9, 14, and 12 in al-Sukkarī. Most of the variant recensions change by just a single word, e.g. al-Sukkarī's *yanzuruhā* versus al-Ma'arrī's *yarqubuhā* in line 11. The only major change appears in the first hemistich of al-Ma'arrī's line 10, *yarūdu fihā nahāran thumma mawriduhū / tāmin 'alayhi furū u l-qāni wa-l-nashamī* ("Here it wanders during the day, followed by its drinking/where branches of grewia and old man's beard [*Clematis vitalba*] drape overhead"), versus al-Sukkarī's line 9, *ya'wī ilā mushmakhīrātīn muṣa' idatin/shummin bi-hinna furū u l-qāni wa-l-nashamī* ("It takes shelter in points up high/where branches of grewia and old man's beard spread out overhead").

<sup>47</sup> Al-Sukkarī (1965, vol. 3, p. 1126) and Al-Dīnawarī (1974, p. 305) both give *al-saḥam*.

<sup>48</sup> Al-Sukkarī has *sayran*, "flying" (lit. "moving," "going") (Al-Sukkarī 1965, p. 134).

<sup>49</sup> Al-Sukkarī has *ghayra inbā'in*, "without warning" (Al-Sukkarī 1965, p. 134).

<sup>50</sup> Al-Sukkarī has *khilāla l-ṣadri*, "through the chest" (Al-Sukkarī 1965, p. 134).

<sup>51</sup> Lane translates *al-saḥam* as "a kind of tree," but says of *al-sajam* that it refers to the leaves of a tree called *khilāf* and which—most relevant here—are often compared to arrowheads (Lane 1984, vol. 1, p. 1322). Most scholars translate *khilāf* as "Egyptian willow," *Salix aegyptiaca*, in Arabic *ṣaṣāf miṣrī* (e.g., Stetkevych 2002, p. 112; Nasrallah 2017, p. 296; Dozy 1877–1881, vol. 1, p. 397), or simply "willow" (Al-Harīrī 2020, p. 285); while a minority give "oleaster," *Elaeagnus angustifolia*, known as Persian olive, or in French, *chalef* and *eleagne* (e.g., Fahd 1996, p. 826). Although the term *khilāf* might refer to both trees, this seems unlikely, since willows and oleasters belong not just to different biological genera, but in fact to different families, *Salicaceae* (the willow family) and *Elaeagnaceae* (the oleaster family) (ambiguity in Arabic animal terms tends to stay at the genus level, e.g. *namir*, which denotes the genus *Panthera*, hence why it is used interchangeably to mean "tiger," "leopard," or "panther," or *ghurāb* for the genus *Corvus* and which is used to mean "crow" or "raven").

customary place of animals in poetry. Jaroslav Stetkevych writes that the journeying poet's she-camel (nāqah), along with the oryx (shabab or mahā) or onager ('ayr or fara) to which it is often compared, assumes a legendary, unicorn-like quality, comparable to the curios of 'ajāib and nawādir literature, since all three creatures appear by epithet more than by name (Stetkevych 2002; Bauer 1992, vol. 1, pp. 35–38). One should not overstate the point about myth, since camels, oryx, and onagers still existed when the early 'Abbāsids wrote their commentaries, unlike the mythical geography of place names or topographical features common to pre-Islamic poetry. However, it is an intriguing conceptual foil al-Ma'arrī's approach, in which animals begin as symbols for human fate, only to wind up as real, pitiable beings.

In fact, not just poetry but also popular sayings (amthāl) become zoocentrized in the Ṣāhil. Sometimes they show up as proof of human cruelty, as for instance when the horse reproduces rajaz poetry "on urging [people] to eat spiny-tailed lizard [genus: Uromastyx]" (fi l-ḥathth 'alā akl al-ḍabb) (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, p. 150), since lizard gut fat is a proverbial Bedouin delicacy:

Aṭ'im akhāka min 'aqanqali l-ḍabb  
innaka in lā tuṭ'imanhu yaghḍab  
Feed your brother lizard gut fat—  
if you don't, then he'll get mad!<sup>52</sup>

Taken as a maxim, these lines mean, "be generous to others," but the horse turns them—ironically—into a reason to mistrust others. Other times, popular amthāl serve as plot points, like the expression "more deceptive than a dove" (akdhab min fākhitah), which comes up as the mule and horse debate whether to let the dove character, al-fākhitah, convey the mule's message (ibid., p. 211). Earlier in the story, the mule had also cited poetic description of horses as noble creatures, in order to flatter the horse character (al-ṣāhil) and prove its competence to carry a message to 'Azīz al-Dawlah' (ibid., pp. 156–57).

Most of the time, al-Ma'arrī is playful and keeps his eye on literary effects when he shifts the focus of poetry and amthāl to the animals themselves. However, if one assumes that he is being earnest, especially when he tries to prove animal agency, then he ignores another writer's advice from two hundred years earlier about equating allegory with reality. In the Kitāb al-Ḥayawān, al-Jāḥiẓ had urged readers to mark off proverbs referring to the natural faculties of animals, e.g., "stupider than a bustard" (aḥmaq min ḥubārā), from proverbs that figuratively treat animals as if morally responsible, such as "more deceptive than a dove." Al-Jāḥiẓ warns against interpreting the second type of proverb literally, thereby confusing human and animal status, since only humans have reason and thus moral agency (Miller 2017, pp. 105–7). Any claims to the contrary, reasons al-Jāḥiẓ, look like the panpsychic beliefs of the aṣḥāb al-jahālāt mentioned above.

The prospect of al-Ma'arrī taking things too literally, at least considering what others say about literary allegory, introduces a sweet irony. Here is a man who constantly resorts to non-literalism—allusions, riddles, double entendre, and obscure meanings for everyday words—to dupe readers into critical self-reflection. Granted, by zoocentrizing the Arabic written tradition, he offers an exceptional way to understand that tradition, even out of a Midas-like yearning to make everything he touches into a pacifist, vegan cautionary tale. Yet at the same time, this method tries to bend the meaning of certain texts to suit his needs, in a way that many commentators would not support. Furthermore, his approach equates literary discourse with historical reality, a tactic that al-Ma'arrī dismisses out of hand whenever readers take his dubious statements at face value, or, as seen previously in Risālat al-ghufrān, when readers buy into overly literal visions of the afterlife. However, he seems more sanguine to do it himself, at least when it affirms God's justice for nonhuman beings.

<sup>52</sup> Also found in (Tha'lab 1960, vol. 2, p. 506; Al-Ābi 1980–1991, vol. 6, p. 201; Al-Tawḥīdī 1988, vol. 6, p. 162, quoting Ibn al-'Amīd; Al-Maydānī 1959, vol. 1, p. 431, no. 2271). Ironically, the uromastyx lizard appears again in the Ṣāhil—though only in passing—as "judge of all the animals" (qāḍī al-bahā'im) (Al-Ma'arrī 1975, p. 214).

These perplexing chinks in al-Ma'arrī's armor could be a sign of anthropocentrism masquerading as animal ethics. Perhaps, as with texts like *Kalīla wa-Dimnah* or the letters of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* nonhuman creatures stand for human behavior whether good or ill. However, from another viewpoint, the fact of self-contradiction speaks not to insincerity but instead to an active mind working through ethical quandaries. This point recalls the words of James Montgomery on al-Jāhīz, who, appearing at times to contradict himself, exhibits from another perspective a nimble intellect at work on the difficulties of large-scale thought: "As with other great systematizers such as Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine or Montaigne, the integrity of the system is at its most vibrant when evidence of its development is most conspicuous" (Montgomery 2006, p. 21). Seen in this way, irreconcilable points about al-Ma'arrī speak to his deeply held concern for animals, which no amount of literary equivocation or apparent anthropocentrism could keep hidden.

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