

Article

# Animal Ethics in Islam: A Review Article

Sarra Tlili

Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, University of Florida, FL 32611, USA; satlili@ufl.edu

Received: 19 August 2018; Accepted: 6 September 2018; Published: 10 September 2018



**Abstract:** This article offers an assessment of the current state of scholarship on animal ethics in Islam. It first discusses a group of texts that share the preoccupation of demonstrating the superiority of Islam's animal teachings, thus exhibiting a clearly apologetic tone. Then it turns to the debate on animal ethics in Western academia. By raising challenging questions, the latter holds the promise of delving deeper into the subject, but at its current stage much of it is still hampered by factual inaccuracies and methodological flaws. In conclusion, the article explains why the subject of animal ethics in Islam is particularly deserving of careful study.

**Keywords:** animals in Islam; human exceptionalism; killing for food; dominion; domestication; premodern tradition; animal rights

## 1. Introduction

[The Mussulmans] are tender almost to infirmity to the brute creation. ([Anonymous 1809](#), p. 3)

The Mussulman preserves the lives of the lower animals solicitously. Though he considers the dog impure, and never makes a friend of him, he thinks it sinful to kill him, and allows the neighbourhood and even the streets of his towns to be infested by packs of masterless brutes, which you would get rid of in London in one day. The beggar does not venture to destroy his vermin: he puts them tenderly on the ground, to be swept up into the clothes of the next passer-by. There are hospitals in Cairo for superannuated cats, where they are fed at the public expense. ([Bacon and Whately 1860](#), p. 144)

I think that Cartesianism belongs, beneath its mechanist indifference, to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition of a war against the animal. ([Derrida 2008](#), p. 101)

Perhaps no animal has a harder time in the Islamic world than the dog. ([Capper 2016](#), p. 78)

The roughly two centuries that separate the first two statements from the last two have led to a remarkable change in the presentation of Islam's position on animals in Western texts. In early modern literature, the "Mussulman" or "Mahometan" could be barbarian and deceitful or chivalrous and magnanimous, yet in both cases his charity to the "brute creation" was affirmed. As early as the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon gave the example of the Turks, whom he depicted as "a cruel people, who nevertheless are kind to beasts, and give alms, to dogs and birds" to corroborate the view that inclination to goodness was deeply imprinted in "man", though—as his example presumably showed—it could be misplaced.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Muslims' compassion could be a sign of the nobility of their character or of the debility of their minds, or could simply be explained away as unrepresentative of their true nature, but in all cases it was seldom questioned.

---

<sup>1</sup> ([Bacon 2010](#)).

More recent literature reflects a complex but overall less positive image. Although Jacques Derrida's claim that Islam is at war against the animal is not shared by more informed critics, it is still representative of a tendency among many ethicists to dismiss the tradition as anti-animal by mere association with its older monotheistic siblings. This position is generally inferred from the fact that, like Judaism and Christianity, Islam authorizes the instrumental use of animals and killing for food. From such well-established themes these ethicists cursorily reach unfounded ones, including the odd idea that Islam gives humans dominion over nonhuman animals or even that it is at war with animals, as Derrida claims.

More informed assessments are more favorable; nonetheless, the growing consensus appears to be that although Islam fares better than some other faith traditions, it still falls short of attending adequately to the needs of nonhuman creatures. Richard Foltz writes, The Islamic tradition does indeed offer much that can lend itself to respect for species other than our own, but it also contains much that is problematic from an animal rights activist point of view. Even much of what could resemble animal rights within the tradition is unheeded by most Muslims or unknown to them (Foltz 2006, p. xii).

Kristen Stilt states that the "rules of Islamic law on animal welfare, established in the seventh century, do more to protect animals than the laws of any country today" (Stilt 2008, pp. 8–9), yet she also cites the example of Egypt, a majority-Muslim country that fares very poorly in world surveys of animal welfare, "receiving an 'F' on an 'A' to 'G' grading scale in 2014 from the organization World Animal Protection" (Stilt 2017, p. 5). Modern assessments thus reflect the view that at the normative level Islam is not as animal-friendly as was previously assumed, whereas at the empirical level Muslims' treatment of nonhuman animals has deteriorated.

Meanwhile, many Muslims continue to insist not only that their tradition is highly attentive to the wellbeing of nonhuman creatures, but even that it offers one of the best moral hopes in this regard. Such discussions, however, fall short of building a solid enough case in defense of this claim. For example, Mawil Izzi Dien lists many protections that the tradition extends to nonhuman animals, including the fact that owners are required to continue to spend time, money, and effort on their aged and diseased animals even if they no longer expect to benefit from them to illustrate the level of care that Islam accords to nonhuman creatures, but he glosses over the question of killing for food (Izzi Dien 2000, p. 45). Failure to adequately address such a crucial point undermines his case.

Although the reasons behind these conflicting perspectives are too complex to be fully addressed here, a few can be highlighted. First, recent discussions indicate that Muslims' attitudes toward nonhuman animals have deteriorated. Contradictory assessments seem thus to reflect at least in part changes at the empirical level. Second, the prism through which the tradition is evaluated is no longer the same. Whereas in missionary and travel literature the average observer was a lay person with, at best, no more than a casual commitment to nonhuman animals' wellbeing, in recent scholarship the tradition is increasingly evaluated from the standpoint of animal rights advocacy. More importantly, cultural, ideological, and political sensitivities play a major part in shaping this debate. On the traditional Muslim side, several works take the form of apologies seeking to resist perceived or real Western attempts at cultural and moral hegemony. On the Western side, many Muslim and non-Muslim authors subject the tradition to a narrow, West-centric version of animal advocacy while often failing to apply the same critical scrutiny to the animal rights discourse.

The aim of this article is to assess the current debate on animal ethics in Islam and consider the extent to which it has helped the modern reader understand this tradition's position on this subject. I will first discuss a group of texts that share the preoccupation of demonstrating the superiority of the tradition, thus exhibiting a clearly apologetic tone, then I will turn to the debate on animal ethics in Western academia. By raising challenging questions, the latter holds the promise of delving deeper into the subject, but at its current stage much of it is still affected by serious problems. In conclusion I will explain why the subject of animal ethics in Islam deserves careful study.

## 2. Apologetic Literature

Several works dealing with the so-called subject of animal rights in Islam share the preoccupation of demonstrating the tradition's superiority in this area. To achieve this goal, one of the oft-repeated arguments consists of the reminder that "Islam" predates the "West" by many centuries in extending "rights" to animals. This argument is often intended to silence critics by reminding them that whereas the West has "just discovered" that animals are worthy of moral consideration, Islam can boast of having included them in its moral compass since its inception. In these discussions, however, Islam is typically reduced to its scriptural teachings, especially reports describing Muhammad's compassionate treatment of nonhuman animals and enjoining Muslims to do the same. The questions of whether, to what extent, and in what ways these teachings have shaped the intellectual and empirical dimensions of the tradition generally fail to receive adequate attention.

This idealized conception of Islam is typically contrasted with a distorted conception of the West and other cultures. For instance, the only examples that Abd Al-Qādir Al-Shaykhalī cites to illustrate other cultures' attitudes toward other animals are animal fights and other cruel practices (Al-Shaykhalī 2006, p. 8). Al-Shaykhalī does not bother to note that many of these practices are now banned from many countries and that when they occur this is increasingly in opposition to, rather than in agreement with, the dominant or at least the growing ethos. In the same vein, Aḥmad Yāsīn Al-Qarāla highlights the West's "moral inconsistencies" by pointing out that the same people who pamper cats and dogs are the most voracious meat-eaters (Al-Qarāla 2009, p. 23). Al-Qarāla does not mention that these "inconsistencies" are fully addressed in Western writings, nor does he allude to the fact that wealthy Muslim countries have developed the same gluttony for meat. Similarly, he fails to acknowledge that "inconsistencies" are common to all cultures and that the very inconsistencies of which he accuses the West are emerging in Muslim countries, especially among elite classes. Thus, while hardly taking note of the struggles waged for the sake of animals in Western countries and other parts of the world, these writings tend to turn a blind eye on what would count as problematic behavior vis-à-vis nonhuman animals in Muslim societies even by the tradition's own standards.

In fact, although these readings deal with animal subjectivities and their titles often include phrases such as *ḥuqūq al-ḥayawān* and *al-rifq bi-l-ḥayawān* ("animal rights" and "kindness to animals", respectively), they tend to be defenses of Islamic tradition rather than animals. Many of them are triggered by criticisms directed against Islam, particularly ones pertaining to its permission to kill animals for food. Ḥasanayn Muhammad Makhlūf explains that he wrote his book in response to a fellow Egyptian's complaint to Makhlūf's father "that kindness to animals is an important topic that foreign countries are concerned with" whereas the "topic was not significant to his forefathers in Islamic countries" (Stilt 2018). His book thus seeks to rectify this misunderstanding. Similarly, Al-Shaykhalī frames his arguments in reaction to criticisms directed by animal rights organizations in the West against Islam's manner of slaughtering sheep (Al-Shaykhalī 2006, p. 8). These works thus share an apologetic tone and serve primarily as identity markers.

Although the cultural anxieties underpinning this type of discourse deserve to be acknowledged and addressed, these works' contribution to the field of animal ethics is less than satisfactory. This approach not only fails to attend carefully to questions arising from genuine concern for nonhuman animals, but generally also posits an essentialized understanding of Islam, the animal, and of cultural differences. This is not to suggest that these authors do not have a point. In fact, ample evidence shows that overall premodern Islamic tradition takes the interests of nonhuman animals very seriously and that it has developed a sensible animal ethics model; however, this does not mean that the tradition is entirely innocent of problematic views and practices nor that all its positions are intuitively graspable. Concerns surrounding the issue of killing for food are particularly legitimate and deserve to be addressed.

Moreover, Islamic tradition is too complex to be reduced to its scriptural teachings. Of course, these teachings have played an important role in shaping Muslims' attitudes toward other creatures, but they have never been the only determining factor. The very claim that Islam extends "rights" to

nonhuman animals is problematic not only due to its anachronistic nature<sup>2</sup>, but also because it seems inconsistent with the principle of monotheism due to the sense of entitlement that seems inherent in the concept of rights. Even the notion of the animal is not as simple as it may appear: Are human beings part of the animal world? Does our conception of the animal typically extend to insects? Answers to these and related questions are not without important ethical implications.

More problematically, the apologetic approach may be a contributor to negative attitudes toward nonhuman animals. Failure to engage critically with the emerging set of problems characterizing humans' impact on nonhuman life in the modern age, including in the Muslim world, is likely to produce a false sense of reassurance, thus arguably facilitating the perpetuation of whatever negative practices and attitudes toward nonhuman animals. This approach can even be theologically problematic. If "Islam" truly takes the lives and wellbeing of nonhuman animals seriously, as this literature consistently emphasizes, then the sense of appeasement derived from these apologies seems to run counter to this attitude.

This said, the cultural and political anxieties underlying the apologetic discourse should not be dismissed as irrelevant to this discussion. Like gender issues, animal advocacy has too often been used to racialize and dehumanize others and to exercise moral imperialism. Glen Elder, Jennifer Wolch, and Jody Emel have shown how "in the contemporary United States, racialization of others is fostered by postcolonial interpretations of the human-animal boundary or divide" (Elder et al. 1998, p. 80). A use of animals that falls outside the norm of what a dominant culture deems acceptable (such as killing a dog for food as opposed to killing her for biomedical research in the modern West, for example) can be interpreted as an act of cruelty and treated as a symbol of savagery, thus potentially becoming legally and socially costly to the person or group who enacts it.

Like other groups who have been subjected to Western imperialism, Muslims have enough good reasons to be wary of Western animal advocacy. From colonial times to the present this principle has often been used as a pretext for the infliction of acts of physical and social violence against them. Animal advocacy in colonial Egypt, for example, was a cause defended by the highest British official in the country, Lord Cromer, "who clearly believed in the inferiority of non-European humans". Such paradox can perhaps explain why "[m]any British anti-cruelty advocates in colonial Egypt expressed their animal welfare politics through violence toward human animals" as Alan Mikhail observes (Mikhail 2014, p. 179). More recently, many animal rights campaigns in Europe have been denounced as smear campaigns against Jews and Muslims (Bergeaud-Blackler 2016). To some Muslims these campaigns may seem particularly ironic as animal advocacy in the West is not without Islamic roots. Jeremy Bentham, the eighteenth/nineteenth-century British philosopher whose oft-cited footnote condemning animal cruelty (Bentham 1879) is credited by many as one of the first triggers of animal advocacy in the West is a case in point. "The very first sentence of that footnote" writes James Carson, "shows that a seminal text in Western philosophical discourse on animal rights draws on non-Western sources (Hinduism and Islam)" (Carson 2013, p. 171).

Apologetic literature on animal ethics is thus not without value. It is a useful source for the study of the intersection between animal ethics on one hand and cultural and colonial tensions on the other. Besides, it gives access to a wealth of primary material, mostly from the ḥadīth, but also from other sources, including the Qur'an and legal texts. Moreover, despite its apologetic tone it is not devoid of interesting analytical insights. Some works also occasionally sermonize their Muslim readers by stressing the importance of treating other animals well and reminding them of the afterlife consequences of such treatment, therefore seeking to create a concrete positive impact on the lives of other animals. However, the critical merit of these works is rather limited and, even

---

<sup>2</sup> The notion of rights, as William Edmundson notes, "first became unmistakably prominent during the period of modern intellectual history known as the Enlightenment, which . . . had its beginnings in the early seventeenth century and ran to the end of the eighteenth" (Edmundson 2012, p. 13).

more problematically, they generally fail to address emerging problems, such as factory farming and animal transportation.

### 3. Western Academia

The Western academic landscape is more complex. Thus far the field has contributed excellent studies and raised important questions, but much of it still suffers from serious drawbacks. On the positive side, Western academics approach the tradition more critically and revisit foundational texts and doctrines from new angles. This approach has invigorated the debate and promises deeper analyses. On the downside, much of the literature suffers from methodological flaws and factual inaccuracies. Perhaps because much of the debate is undertaken by non-Islamicists who, due to language and training limitations, have no direct access to primary sources and only a cursory appreciation of the tradition's intellectual history; misreadings, oversimplifications, and forthright misinformation prevail in much of the literature. Moreover, while showing much critical insight toward Islamic tradition, the debate often fails to approach animal ethics theories with similar critical rigor. These limitations often lead to ambivalent positions and one-sided readings whereby the complexity of ethical dilemmas and pressures of lived reality fail to be given adequate attention.

#### 3.1. Critical Approach

G. H. Bousquet's article comparing attitudes toward nonhuman animals in the three monotheisms is probably the first to offer an academic treatment of animal ethics in Islam (Bousquet 1958). The article's explicit comparative frame is helpful in identifying Islam's distinctive features and situating its views of animals in a wider context. Bousquet observes for example that unlike Indian traditions, the three monotheisms share an anthropocentric premise consisting of the belief that animals are created for the sake of humans. Regardless of this observation's accuracy, the comparative approach can reveal previously unnoticed features and allows one to see things in more perspective.

From Bousquet's comparison, Islam emerges as the most attuned of the three monotheisms to the wellbeing of nonhuman animals. The author offers an interesting metaphor to the effect that when the Judaic seed of compassion was thrown on Christian soil it could not grow any roots, but when the same seed fell on Islamic soil it found a fertile ground that allowed it to thrive. Interestingly, Bousquet's analytical approach does more to illustrate this positive side than the apologetic discourse, for unlike the latter, this author looks beyond doctrinal and legal stipulations and considers how concern for animals permeates daily life, shapes personal piety, and represents a social ideal to which everyone is encouraged to aspire.

Some of Bousquet's ideas did not stand the test of scrutiny. More recent research has demonstrated that Indian traditions are as guilty of anthropocentrism as their monotheistic counterparts (Waldau 2002; Nelson 1998) and that the anthropocentric character of the three monotheisms is mitigated by a theocentric dimension linked to the spiritual abilities that all three traditions ascribe to nonhuman animals (Bauckham 2002; Tlili 2017b). Nonetheless, the author not only offers useful analyses, but he also calls attention to themes that deserve further inquiry. He observes for example that seemingly similar practices can be underlain by widely divergent motivations. For instance, in both Egypt and France one finds institutions that seem to denote respect for—or even liberality towards—dogs. In the former case this consists of endowments benefiting these animals whereas in the latter it consists of cemeteries where the wealthy bury them. Bousquet argues that despite their seeming similarity the sentiments underlying these practices have nothing in common.

It took the field a few decades since Bousquet's work to witness the appearance of new contributions. Of these, James Wescoat's article "The 'Right of Thirst' for Animals in Islamic Law: A Comparative Approach" (Wescoat 1995) not only sheds light on a little-studied point (*haqq al-shurb*, i.e., the right of access to water, otherwise known as "the right of thirst"), but unlike Bousquet's article, it pays closer attention to the topic's empirical dimension. In Wescoat's analysis the Islamic legal system once again emerges as very attentive to the wellbeing of nonhuman animals—far more so than

contemporary western legal systems—but the author also notes the disconnect between the normative and the empirical dimensions. Under colonial, political, and economic pressures traditional legal stipulations have lost much of their weight, leading to lack of observance of many religious doctrines and legal stipulations. Although Wescoat recognizes that neither Western nor Muslim countries are likely to formally adopt Islamic rulings about animals, he argues that these rulings can still be relevant not only to Muslims, but also to Westerners. In the former case teachings about animals can continue to shape individuals' behavior, whereas in the latter it can become a resource for reformers who seek to rework existing laws or frame new ones.

The more substantial contributions, however, consist of Basheer Ahmad Masri's *Animal Welfare in Islam* (Masri 2007), and even more so of Richard Foltz's *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures* (Foltz 2006). Although Foltz's book was just preceded by another (*L'Animal en Islam*) (Benkheira et al. 2005), his enjoyed wider circulation possibly due to the language medium, but even more likely because unlike *L'Animal en Islam*, Foltz's book engages the conceptual tools of animal rights theory. Combined with his survey of a wide range of documents from different genres and historical periods, Foltz has succeeded more than any previous author in incorporating Islamic perspectives in the Western debate on animal ethics.

Approaching the subject from the standpoint of animal rights advocacy, Foltz has also taken the conversation to a new analytical level. Rather than cursorily observing that Islam is anthropocentric, for instance, he treats anthropocentrism as a moral problem in need of ethical engagement. Consistent with the advocacy approach, the book seeks to initiate a deeper and more committed conversation with the aim of creating a concrete impact. As noted in the introduction, Foltz does not deny that the tradition shows real concern for animals, but he is also troubled by the fact that it allows killing for food and by what he perceives as negative attitudes toward dogs, among other things. He also bemoans the disconnect between the normative and empirical dimensions of the tradition. Even if Islam has the best teachings about animals, it means little if these teachings are not heeded.

As noteworthy as Foltz's accomplishment is, however, several problems detract from it. Foltz's prioritization of breadth over depth has resulted in several implausible conclusions. For instance, based on a cursory reading of a medieval fable he presents its authors, the anonymous group known as the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', as champions of the animal cause in Islam. Indeed, contrary to Foltz's assessment, ample research has shown that these authors are unusually steeped in hierarchical thinking and that their worldview is profoundly anthropocentric. Their fascinating fable notwithstanding, a more careful reading that situates it in the authors' general oeuvre reveals that animals fare very poorly on their scheme (Tili 2014). This cursory approach characterizes Foltz's reading of several texts, including foundational ones such as the Qur'an and ḥadīth, resulting in many implausible conclusions.

This problem is compounded by lack of questioning of the author's own cultural assumption and the theoretical premises of the animal rights discourse. For example, Foltz treats the mainstream tradition's objection to keeping dogs as pets as an expression of hostility, as if dogs naturally crave human attention and would suffer if deprived of it. Foltz does not seem to notice the anthropocentric undertone of this position. More generally, he seems unaware of, or at least he fails to highlight the anthropocentric character of the very animal rights discourse that he embraces, particularly the problem of extensionism. This consists of the implicit premise common to prominent animal ethics theories such as utilitarianism, deontology, Aristotelianism, and contractarianism, whereby moral consideration is allocated to other creatures based on their level of similarity to humans, be it in terms of cognition, anatomy, size, or otherwise. Many have noted that by keeping humankind firmly tied to the center while extending consideration based on such criteria, the dominant animal rights discourse reinforces rather than destabilizes anthropocentric presuppositions (Fellenz 2010).

Furthermore, although Foltz is fully justified in raising the problem of killing for food, his discussion does not do justice to the complexity of this ethical dilemma. Universal vegetarianism, the model that he seems to advocate, causes more problems than it solves. One of its many difficulties is related to what should be done with domestic animals. Conventional rightists propose that we breed

them out of existence (extinctionism). It is not clear whether Foltz shares this view, but if he does, the momentous consequences of such a radical solution, including ethical ones on the very creatures that it aims to protect, demand fuller engagement. Without counting the impact on human societies, to decide on behalf of billions of creatures that they should no longer procreate seems to betray the same patriarchal sentiment of which traditional systems are accused. Moreover, because such a course can only be imposed on animals (as Tony Milligan observes, “animals cannot be persuaded into sexual abstinence”) it not only results in the frustration of their natural desire for procreation and parenting, but also involves the violation of their bodily integrity. The process consists of the “physical seizure of the bodies of animals in order to make them conform to our human plans” (Milligan 2015, pp. 133–34). An Islamicist should also weigh the political and cultural repercussions of this solution on the Muslim world. To deprive Muslim and other non-Western societies of domestic animals means entrenchment of their dependence on Western technology which could lead to a new host of economic, political, and cultural problems.

The very concept of vegetarianism is more complex than Foltz and others seem to realize. If this notion is merely taken to mean abstention from the flesh of animals, then yes, this is what it is; if, however, it is taken to mean that a given diet has no cost in animal life, then this is inaccurate. As many animal advocates admit, all diets, including vegan ones, have a blood price. An ovo-lacto vegetarian diet still depends on a system that *requires* the killing of many animals (for example most males), for otherwise it cannot be cost-effective enough to be maintained. A vegan diet causes the killing of insects which, as any farmer knows, are among humans’ main competitors over grown food, thus frequently inviting the use of techniques (including the use of insecticides) that would keep them at bay. Moreover, ordinary agricultural practices, such as ploughing and harvesting, cause the death of many field animals, including birds, small rodents, amphibians, and reptiles. These animals are either killed directly when machines run over their bodies or indirectly, for example through the destruction of their nests and hiding spaces, which exposes them to predators and other life-threatening situations. Moreover, in the absence of large working animals from the field, as dictated by vegan philosophy, vegan farming of any significant scale must depend on a mechanical system that is far more invasive than traditional, livestock-dependent systems. In fact, Steven Davis suggests that the mere presence of livestock animals even in a farm that uses mechanical equipment decreases the overall number of killed animals because “pasture forage production requires fewer passages through the field with tractors and other farm equipment” (Davis 2003, p. 390). Because of this Davis argues that raising large herbivores (obviously, this often means for food for the system to remain cost-effective) contributes significantly to decreasing the overall number of animals killed in a farm. His analysis thus indicates that a vegan diet not only has a blood price but may even be costlier in life. Although Davis’s views were challenged by some, he still raises important concerns that animal ethicists, including ones dealing with Islamic tradition, must ponder.

In view of this, one should consider whether and to what extent defenses of vegetarian and vegan diets are shaped by the extensionist disposition of the dominant animal rights philosophy. In fact, prominent advocates of vegetarianism and veganism at best refrain from weighing the interests of smaller animals such as insects (Francione 2000, p. 176) and at worst openly exclude these animals from their moral consideration (Regan 1983, p. 76).<sup>3</sup> Defenses of these diets thus reflect the assumption

---

<sup>3</sup> Gary Francione does not rule out the possibility that insects may be sentient, but he refrains from weighing their interests in his overall moral scheme as he feels obligated to “draw the line somewhere”. Of course, this very “drawing of a line” means the exclusion of many animal categories from our moral consideration. Tom Regan is more assertive in excluding many animals from his moral circle. He writes, “Because some animals frequently differ from *us* [emphasis added] in quite fundamental ways in these respects, it is not unreasonable to view them as utterly lacking in consciousness. Like automatic garage doors that open when they register an electronic signal, or like the pinball machine that registers the overly aggressive play of a competitor and lights up ‘Tilt!’ some animals may be reasonably viewed as making their ‘behavioral moves’ in the world without any awareness of it”. This approach perpetuates the Cartesian model not only due to its exclusionary nature, but also due to its adoption of rational faculties as the main or sole determining factor. It only differs

that larger animals, ones to whom humans can relate more, are worthier of moral consideration than smaller ones. If things were different the answers will become less certain. As Milligan writes,

Any approach towards animal ethics which advocates a more thoroughgoing species egalitarianism at all levels—from elephants down to beetles—and which accordingly insists that death harms in a uniform manner, may experience difficulties [in defending an exclusively plant-based diet]. (Milligan 2010, p. 146)

By highlighting these difficulties my aim is not to offer any conclusive remarks on the legitimacy of killing for food—a problem that is, in any case, beyond the scope of the present article—but rather to show that this question is far too complex to be solved by mere appeal to moral intuition, as Foltz does. These criticisms notwithstanding, Foltz still deserves the credit at least of initiating this important debate and for laying the ground for more nuanced studies.

One such study is Alan Mikhail's *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (Mikhail 2014). Unlike Foltz, Mikhail limits the scope of his research historically and geographically to Ottoman Egypt and species wise to farm animals, dogs, and charismatic megafauna. The Ottoman period in Egypt corresponds to the transitional historical juncture of early modernity, whereby various tensions led to profound social, political, economic, and cultural changes. While primarily concerned with the impact of these changes on human-animal relations, the book also provides a window into an important period of Egypt's history and, as importantly, calls attention to the role of animals as historical agents. History is never shaped by the actions of humans alone. In major though often unnoticed ways it also involves the work of and interaction with many other creatures, as Mikhail's ample evidence shows.

While situating his discussion in the modern debate on animal ethics, as a historian, Mikhail brings into this debate the weight of lived reality and the pressures of everyday-life. As in any pre-fossil-fuel dependent economy, animal power, both human and nonhuman, was the primary source of energy in early modern Egypt. Nonhuman animals were a source of energy in a nutritional sense, but even more importantly, their own and their human masters' muscles provided the energy that was needed to perform innumerable tasks, including the irrigation of agricultural fields, transportation, and construction. This meant that life was not easy. The image that emerges from Mikhail's discussion is of exhausted humans, cattle, and pack animals, but also of beings whose mutual dependency nurtured empathy and dictated care.

A host of factors, many of which linked to modernizing efforts, worked together to cause profound changes. Environmental disasters, political rivalries, the emergence of the nation state, colonial invasion, technological innovations, urbanization, and the absorption of new cultural and aesthetic ideals simultaneously decreased humans' dependence on other animals and diminished feelings of empathy toward them. Although earlier on dogs were perceived as impure and almost never admitted indoors, they were provided for and protected for reasons of piety but also of expediency. As garbage eaters and neighborhood protectors, dogs provided invaluable services in return for the care and protection provided by their human fellows. Once dogs lost these functions to the government institutions created by the nation state they became expendable. These changes affected Egyptians' relation with and perception of many species. "The labor of animals was deemed obsolete at the turn of the nineteenth century", writes Mikhail, "their bodies became threatening sources of disease and annoyance; and their economic worth came to be defined by capitalist market relations instead of reciprocal exchange and an economy of wonder". "The modernizing state", Mikhail concludes, "forever cleaved the human-animal relationship" (Mikhail 2014, p. 15). Thus, rather than simply delineating the process that led to the deterioration of Muslims' attitudes toward other animals, Mikhail analyzes the intertwined forces that determined its direction. Though his analysis is concerned with Ottoman Egypt, his insights are applicable far beyond this context.

---

from the Cartesian model in widening the circle of moral attention to include mammals who are more than one year old. For more on this point, see (Plumwood 2002, chp. 7).

This level of scholarly rigor is met by a growing number of works. (Marion Katz ([Berkowitz and Katz 2016](#)); Kim Fortuny ([Fortuny 2014](#)); Donna Landry ([Landry 2015](#))), to cite only a few, wisely avoid overarching assessments and opt instead for close analyses of the views of individual scholars, specific legal matters, and specific social groups. Moreover, while engaging the theoretical tools of the animal ethics discourse these authors are careful to not grant Western philosophy normative status. This allows them to remain sensitive to cultural and historical differences without relinquishing critical rigor. This body of literature stands in contrast with another where misinformation, misrepresentation, and oversimplification are a salient problem.

### 3.2. Misinformation, Misinterpretation, and Oversimplification

The need to include sections on Islam in multivolume works at a time when the field of animal ethics was in its infancy seems to have led some editors to seek the help of non-specialists, something that resulted in less than satisfactory contributions. A short article in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare* illustrates this problem. The author, no less an authority than Paul Waldau, who has developed some of the most nuanced conceptual tools for the study of animal ethics in religion, emphasizes Islam's anthropocentric character, which he presents as barely mitigated by a dimension of responsibility toward nonhuman animals. The same article, however, reveals the author's unfamiliarity even with basic aspects of Islamic tradition, let alone the Qur'an and the other texts that he discusses. For example, Waldau places the sacrificial holiday (*ʿĪd al-īḍḥā*), which occurs on the tenth day of the last (twelfth) month of the Islamic calendar (Dhū-l-ḥijja), at the end of the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. Among the unfortunate results of this misinformed approach is the casual affirmation that the Qur'an contains negative views of other animals ([Waldau 1998](#)). Indeed, the closer one studies this scripture the more such affirmation proves questionable ([Tili 2010, 2012](#)). Of course, the Qur'an, like any other text, lends itself to multiple interpretations; however, a careful reading using Waldau's very conceptual tools yields a surprisingly non-anthropocentric outlook. Another unfortunate outcome is the presentation of marginal opinions as if they were central to the tradition's worldview while failing to point to legal, theological, and other scholarly debates which are more serious in character and which have played a more important role in shaping Muslims' attitudes toward nonhuman creatures. Obviously, this uninformed and selective approach serves to perpetuate stereotypes more than provide useful information about the tradition.

Although the field has since grown considerably, the problem of misinformation persists. In a more recent piece—nearly two decades following the publication of Waldau's article—Daniel Capper offers a more rounded and more detailed reading of the tradition which, nonetheless, includes serious inaccuracies. One of the points Capper seeks to make is that although in Islam nonhuman animals are believed to have souls, the tradition ascribes them a lower type of soul, what he refers to as “*nafs* (sic) *al-ammara*, a base soul that pursues needs, wants, and survival”. In contrast, he argues, humans have a higher type of soul. He writes,

Although the issue has been debated, in consonance with later Neoplatonism the dominant Islamic tradition avers that humans, and only humans, possess a second, rational soul, a *nafs* [sic] *al-lawwama* (in another tradition, *al-ruh*), which provides conscience and the ability to choose between right and wrong. This soul, not the animal soul, is the soul that ultimately goes to heaven. ([Capper 2016](#), p. 74)

This is a strange reading of the soul motif whereby marginal views are again given disproportional weight. Indeed, although the dominant tradition is guilty of several negative views about nonhuman animals and although some of these views can be blamed on the influence of Neoplatonism, the soul

motif is hardly one of them. The phrases *al-nafs al-ammāra*<sup>4</sup> and *al-nafs al-lawwāma*<sup>5</sup> are derived from the Qur'an and—along with the phrase *al-nafs al-muṭma'inna* (the content and peaceful soul)—have been used, particularly in Sufi circles, to describe different stages in humans' spiritual growth. Some Sufis and students of Hellenism did equate these stages with the Neoplatonic notions of "animal" and "rational" souls, but this position is far from dominant. In fact, contrary to Capper's claim, the mainstream tradition has *overwhelmingly* treated nonhuman animals as possessors of "rūḥ", the supposedly higher type of soul (Tili 2017a). The use of the phrase "dhū/dhī rūḥ" (possessor of a soul) as a way of referring to animals, both human and nonhuman, abounds in works of lexicography, theology (*kalām*), qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), *adab* (roughly, literature) and other texts.

Capper's claim that according to the mainstream tradition heaven is populated mainly by humans is more justified, but even this theme is more nuanced than his discussion conveys. Indeed, the mainstream tradition holds also that nonhuman animals will be resurrected and that they, like humans, face afterlife accountability (Tili 2012). This conception is highly significant. It indicates that nonhuman animals are perceived as having at least some sense of morality and that they can make both good and bad choices. The tradition thus ascribes them important abilities. On the other hand, by limiting nonhuman animals' accountability to the afterlife the tradition has also protected them from human judgment and the expectation that they abide by humans' moral standards. This remarkable balance marks an important departure from prevalent anthropocentric attitudes, for nonhuman animals are ascribed considerable complexity yet without being measured against human standards. It has also protected nonhuman animals of the kind of animal trials conducted in medieval Europe (Evans 1906; Oldridge 2005, chp. 3).

It should be noted, however, that although most Muslims accept that nonhuman animals will be resurrected and judged in the hereafter, the potential impact of this theme on nonhuman animals' status did not receive adequate attention. Muslims generally do not question the principle of nonhuman animals' afterlife because both the Qur'an and—even more explicitly—the Prophetic Tradition (ḥadīth) establish this principle. Remarkably, when the same scriptural sources are examined carefully one discovers that even the difference between human and nonhuman's final destinies is not founded on anthropocentric premises. This difference is generally linked to a qur'anic verse stating, "We have offered the Trust (*Amāna*) to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but they shied away from it and declined to assume it; however, the human being assumed it. He was utterly unjust, utterly haughty" (Q 33/al-Aḥzāb: 72). The intensity of humans' afterlife destiny is thus linked to a choice in which they and other creatures were involved at a primordial time. When the *Amāna* (Trust) was offered to various creatures, the human being was the only creature that jumped on it. One also should not forget that this unwise move elicited divine criticism. The *Amāna*, as Qur'an exegetes explain, consists of the bargain to be tested in this life in return for either eternal (or long-term) reward or punishment in the hereafter. The different treatment reserved for humans is therefore the result of a risky choice that they alone seem to have made. It should be reminded also that because of this choice, not only heaven, but also the hellfire, is populated mainly by humans. Thus, had Capper studied the "soul" and "afterlife" motifs more carefully he would not have exempted the tradition from critical assessment, but he would have offered a more accurate diagnosis.

Misinformation and misreadings are even more salient in Katherine Perlo's *Kinship and Killing* (Perlo 2009). The author takes up the daunting task of proposing an explanation for what she perceives as mixed legacies toward nonhuman animals in four world traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism) and to refute the claim that "a given author's faith is overwhelmingly or essentially pro-animal" (Perlo 2009, p. 1). Perlo seems to reject, or at least deemphasize, the sacred nature of religion, arguing that human attitudes are the immediate source of religious doctrines which are then

<sup>4</sup> Literally, "the commanding soul", i.e., a soul that commands one to do evil deeds.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, "the blaming or accusing soul", i.e., a soul that keeps a critical eye on one's behavior.

projected on divine or otherwise sacred beings or sources. She attributes the presence of both pro- and anti-animal teachings in these traditions to the fact that humans have mixed feelings toward other creatures, something that results in what she describes as doctrines of “aggression”, “evasion”, and “defense”. Doctrines of “aggression”, she explains, are ones that seek to justify the oppression of animals “in terms of their naturalness, inevitability, or inherent morality” (Perlo 2009, p. 6), whereas the doctrine of “evasion” “diverts attention from exploitative practices by introducing precepts of kindness within the power structure or emphasizing its benevolent aspect” (Perlo 2009, p. 7). Finally, the doctrine of “defense”, she writes, seeks to protect people from “actual revenge or attack, symbolic revenge in the form of illness or other manifestations of a bad conscience, or one’s own pain caused by identification with that of another” (Perlo 2009, p. 8).

Commenting on this approach, Geoffrey Barstow writes, “Unfortunately, Perlo is hampered by her attempt to identify strategies that cut across all world religions. In her attempt for breadth, she can sometimes miss important aspects of individual traditions (particularly non-Western traditions such as Buddhism)” (Barstow 2017, p. 12). This comment applies equally to her treatment of Islamic tradition. The section on Islam reveals not only the author’s less than adequate familiarity with the tradition, but also a surprising failure to cite even English sources accurately. For example, Perlo takes Basheer Ahmad Masri’s “conceptual” vegetarianism to mean that he has become an actual vegetarian (Perlo 2009, p. 95). Indeed, although Masri says that he “has become a vegetarian by conviction”, he also adds that his “metabolism got so used to meat that a complete change over to a vegetarian diet has now become very difficult” (Masri 2007, p. 57). Thus, in his own words Masri affirms that, in practice, a vegetarian diet is beyond his ability. Perlo also misnames the medieval author (Izz Al-Dīn) ibn Abd Al-Salām (d. 660/1262) as “Al-Salam” (Perlo 2009, p. 97). Her referencing of ḥadīth reports is unintelligible. Apparently under the impression that specific numbers have been assigned to given reports across ḥadīth works, she gives the numbers of “books” and “chapters” within ḥadīth compilations but fails to provide the title of the actual compilations and the names of their compilers. Someone with no prior knowledge of her cited material will not be able to locate her ḥadīth citations (Perlo 2009, p. 102).

These oversights are symptomatic of deeper problems consisting of the misrepresentation and misreading of core themes. For example, Perlo raises the possibility that the Prophet Muhammad was largely a vegetarian without mentioning her sources or explaining how she has reached this conclusion. She then proceeds to discount Muhammad’s alleged vegetarianism as a sign of asceticism rather than compassion toward nonhuman animals. Like many other Arabs, she maintains, Muhammad was attracted to Syrian Christianity with its mystical-ascetic bent. These Arabs, she writes, “emulated the Syrian Christian monks by swearing off meat and drink and becoming wandering ascetics, or *hanifs*” (Perlo 2009, p. 97). This view not only misrepresents Muhammad’s biography and teachings—for contrary to Perlo’s claim, the Prophet is reported to have explicitly shunned asceticism (Ibn Al-Ḥajjāj 1991, vol. 2, p. 1020)<sup>6</sup> and to have slaughtered his own animals and consumed meat (Ibn Al-Ḥajjāj 1991, vol. 3, p. 1563)—but it also glosses over the meaning of the word *ḥanīf* and takes no note of the rich debates around it both in traditional and modern sources.

The same problem is clear in Perlo’s reading of the Qur’an. To give one example, in her attempt to refute the suggestion that animal titles of qur’anic sūras (chapters) are a sign of a favorable attitude, she writes:

Of these chapters, only one, s. [i.e., sūra, or qur’anic chapter] 105, The Elephant, mentions the animal in the first verse; it (sūra 105/al-Fil) is unusual also in being actually a story about

<sup>6</sup> The ḥadīth scholar Muslim Ibn Al-Ḥajjāj reports on the authority of Anas who said, “One companion of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, . . . said, ‘I will not get married’; another said, ‘I will not eat meat’; and a third said, ‘I will not lie down on a comfortable bed [meaning, I’ll stay up in prayer at night]’. [When he heard this] the Prophet praised God then said, ‘Why do some people speak like this when I myself observe prayer then sleep, observe fasting on certain days and eat regularly on others, and marry women? Whoever shuns my way has no relation to me’”.

the named animal (whose role is, however, a hostile one). Here a sacrilegious power, with an elephant or elephants as part of its army, is defeated by birds sent by Allah. (Perlo 2009, p. 109)

Aside from failing to spell out why mention in the first verse (or for that matter even in the title) would be a sign of importance, Perlo, again, misrepresents the Qur'an and its adjacent exegetical literature. Whereas *sūrat al-Fil* (105) speaks neither favorably nor unfavorably about the elephant, Muslim exegetes point out that though one or more elephants were part of what Perlo describes as a "sacrilegious power" (The army of Abraha, who ruled Yemen in the name of the Ethiopian king the Negus and whose army according to Islamic sources attacked Mecca a few decades prior to the advent of Islam), the individual elephant after whom the *sūra* is titled resisted his human masters and refused to attack the Ka'aba (the holy shrine in Mecca) and was accordingly spared the severe punishment that the "birds sent by Allah" inflicted on the army. Some accounts mention that another (or other) elephant(s) did the opposite and, like the human culprits, was/were punished (Tlili 2012, pp. 104–5). If one is to take these exegetical accounts as consonant with the Qur'anic narrative, the elephant after whom the *sūra* is titled stands out for doing the right thing and accordingly reaps the benefits. From these exegetical commentaries elephants also come across as capable of making moral choices and of assuming the ensuing consequences, which implies that they are treated as responsible beings. Furthermore, these commentaries indicate that species membership has no bearings on one's status and divine treatment. Both principles are determined by the level of one's consciousness of God and obedience to him.

Obedience to God, however, is not necessarily a virtue in Perlo's view. Rather, she finds the principle of divine voluntarism a sign of authoritarianism and argues that this doctrine "has been used to suppress instincts of sympathy" (Perlo 2009, p. 96). Such reductionism is in fact the most problematic aspect in Perlo's approach. Although her thesis that religious doctrines are projected on, rather than derived from, scriptural and other religious sources is not without merit, her casual dismissal of centuries-long efforts to grapple with difficult ethical dilemmas as no more than self-serving strategies can hardly count as serious scholarship. Perlo reduces Ash'arī theology to one decontextualized citation highlighting God's freedom to do what he wants with his creation, as if this stance was reached arbitrarily or this single citation can do justice to the full complexity of Ash'arī thought (Perlo 2009, p. 96). The polysemous nature of the theme of Abraham's sacrifice of his son is reduced to no more than "a symbol of divine authority outweighing natural sentiment in the human context" (Perlo 2009, p. 95). It should also be noted that while proposing these provocative readings, Perlo offers little analysis to defend or corroborate them. This is a missed opportunity, for had she combined her critical approach with adequate study of primary and secondary sources she could have contributed useful insights.

Even Foltz's work is not free from such inaccuracies. He also maintains that Masri was a lifelong vegetarian (Foltz 2006, p. 92) and states that 'Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, was the Prophet's nephew (Foltz 2006, p. 18). In fact, the Prophet had no biological siblings and therefore could not have had any nephews (unless one counts his foster siblings, the children of his wet-nurse Ḥalīma Al-Sadiyya). Foltz also affirms that the crucial difference between humans and other animals according to mainstream Islam is "that humans alone possess *taqwa* (consciousness), which implies that we alone can be judged for our acts" (Foltz 2006, p. 6). This statement not only mistranslates the word *taqwā*,<sup>7</sup> but also mischaracterizes the tradition in important ways. Indeed, although mainstream Islamic tradition does not use the concept of *taqwā* to describe nonhuman animals' spiritual states, it still holds that they are at least God-conscious and, as noted earlier, that they face afterlife accountability.

<sup>7</sup> Although the word *taqwā* does not have a clear-cut equivalent in English, it can more accurately be translated as piety or God-consciousness, not merely as consciousness. It refers to a feeling that a creature can experience vis-à-vis God, consisting of a mixture of fear and love, or fear to offend out of love. The creature that experiences this feeling is thus God-conscious and seeks to please God to avoid his displeasure.

This is not to contest Foltz's basic thesis, however, for there is no doubt that most Muslims subscribe to the principle of human exceptionalism. Nevertheless, the tradition shows considerable uncertainty when it seeks to justify this principle. More often the superiority of humans is founded on the theme of rationality (rather than piety or God-consciousness), but those who pursue this or any other argument to its logical end often reach a point where they either contradict themselves or are forced to reconsider their views (Tili 2012). A more rigorously critical analysis could thus have shown that the tradition's foundational doctrines cannot be easily used to corroborate claims about human exceptionalism.

The author from whose work Foltz seems to have derived the argument about *taqwā*, the late Basheer Ahmad Masri, is responsible for a number of these oversights (Masri 2007, p. 7). Masri is to my knowledge the first author to have addressed animal ethics in the modern context from an Islamic standpoint, paying attention to issues such as factory farming and biomedical research. As important as his contribution is, however, the author approaches the subject with a level of specialization that is barely above that of the lay educated Muslim. This results in multiple inaccuracies, including the claim that in Islam "man" is given dominion over other animals, an unfounded idea that, nonetheless, has started to take on a life of its own (Masri 2007, p. 7).

The growing acceptance of this supposed dominion notwithstanding, there is clear disagreement on its scriptural foundation. Lisa Kemmerer situates it in the Qur'anic notion of "*tamkīn*"<sup>8</sup> (Kemmerer 2006, p. 347) whereas Patricia Crone links it to the notions of "*tafḍīl*"<sup>9</sup> and "*taskhīr*"<sup>10</sup> (Crone 2004, p. 354). Capper, on the other hand, links it to the notions of *amāna*<sup>11</sup> and *istikhlāf*<sup>12</sup> and finds some support for it in the Qur'anic statement that God created the human being in the "fairest stature".<sup>13</sup> Of course, the main reason behind this disagreement is that no verse in the Qur'an gives humans dominion over other creatures. This leads these and other scholars to attach the biblical notion (Genesis 1:26) to a variety of Qur'anic themes that highlight God's favors toward humankind. Ultimately, thus, this is guilt by association. The Qur'an is automatically assumed to mimic the Bible and is criticized for ideas it does not even express. A more careful approach, even if premised on the assumption that the Qur'an subscribes to the principle of human exceptionalism, should have sought to understand and evaluate this scripture's own version of this principle instead of conflating its position with that of another scripture. Such approach shows lack of interest in evaluating the Islamic scripture according to its own terms.

Going back to some of these notions<sup>14</sup>, close analysis shows not only that none of them corresponds to the biblical idea of dominion, but also that none of them can be used unproblematically to defend the principle of human privilege. The verbal form *makkana*, from which the notion of *tamkīn* is derived, means primarily "to settle", "to secure", and "to establish". The lexicographer Edward Lane translates the sentence "*makkana-hu*" as "He gave him a place, he assigned him a place, and settled, or established him" (Lane 1968, vol. 8, p. 3022). Arthur Arberry translates the verse adduced by Kemmerer as: "We have established you [i.e., humankind, *makkannā-kum*] in the earth and there appointed for you livelihood; little thanks you show" (Arberry 1955, p. 171). Muhammad Asad translates the same verse as "Indeed, O men, [sic] We have given you a [bountiful] place on earth, and appointed thereon means of livelihood for you: [yet] how seldom are you grateful!" (Asad 2003, p. 232). The medieval exegete Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) paraphrases the pertinent sentence in this verse saying, "We [God] have paved and smoothed for you, humankind, the earth and made it a place

<sup>8</sup> This notion is mentioned in verse 10 in sūrat al-Arāf (7), among other verses.

<sup>9</sup> This notion occurs in verse 70 in sūrat al-Isrā' (17).

<sup>10</sup> Crone refers to verse 13 in sūrat al-Jāthiya (45), but the notion occurs in numerous other verses.

<sup>11</sup> This notion occurs in verse 72 in sūrat al-Aḥzāb (33).

<sup>12</sup> This notion occurs in verse 30 in sūrat al-Baqara (2).

<sup>13</sup> This notion occurs in verse 4 in sūrat al-Tīn (95).

<sup>14</sup> For the notions of *taskhīr*, *tafḍīl*, and *istikhlāf* and for more on *amāna* and the "fairest stature" depiction, see Tili, *Animals in the Qur'an*.

where you can settle, an expanse adapted to your movements, and a comfortable place where you can rest (*waṭṭa' nā la-kum, ayyuhā l-nās, fī l-arḍi wa-ja'ālnāhā la-kum qarāran tastaqīrrūna fī-hā wa-mīhādan tamtahidūna-hā wa-firāshan taftarishūna-hā*)" (Al-Ṭabarī 2008, vol. 12, p. 315). In these interpretations the idea of *tamkīn* consists merely of the fact that God has provided humans with an abode where they can live and made the land habitable for them.

This is not to deny that an element of authority is detectable from later interpretations. Al-Zajjāj (d. 311/923), for example, defines the word *tamkīn* as "putting [someone] in possession and giving them power (*al-tamlīk wa-l-quḍra*)" (Al-Zajjāj 1988, vol. 2, p. 320). Thus, in this exegete's understanding God has given humans ownership in the land and has endowed them with power, but neither the Qur'anic verse nor Al-Zajjāj say that this is power or authority *over other creatures*. What Al-Zajjāj means is probably that God has provided humans with opportunities, skills, and abilities (*quḍra*) that are perceived as necessary for their survival. This is a far cry from prevalent interpretations of the biblical notion of dominion.

But even if absent from Al-Zajjāj's interpretation, the idea of "authority over other creatures" emerges in more recent works. The Tunisian exegete Al-Ṭāhir ibn Āshūr (d. 1393/1973) comments on verse 10 in sūrat al-Aḥrāf saying, "we have given you power over the matters of the earth *and enabled you to handle its creatures (khaṭwālnā-kum al-taṣarrufa fī makhlūqāti-hā)* thanks to the faculty of reason that God has instilled in humankind" (emphasis added. Ibn Āshūr 1984, p. 33). Similarly, the Arabic dictionary *Al-Mu'jam al-wasīṭ* defines the verb *makkana* as "*ja'āla la-hu sulṭānan*", a definition that seems to convey the idea of authority over others, as in non-Qur'anic Arabic the word *sulṭān* means authority that is linked to ruling and kingship (Ḍayf 2003, p. 881). Moreover, even if *The Study Quran* (Nasr et al. 2015) renders the idea of *tamkīn* as "to establish on earth", the translators suggest as another possible interpretation that God has given or *delegated* to humankind certain powers in the world, an idea that is reminiscent of the notion of Dominion (detectable from the notion of delegation).<sup>15</sup>

Of course, these interpretations should be studied not for what they have to say about the Qur'an, but rather about the interpreters' worldviews. This brief survey seems to point to a growing trend of anthropocentrism in Islamic thought, whereby humans and their role on earth become more central with time. In fact, studies of other Qur'anic terms, such as *jahl* (supposedly, ignorance), *khalīfa* (supposedly, vicegerent), and *rūḥ* (supposedly, soul), have already introduced this thesis. These works not only show that the meaning of certain words has evolved over time, but they also explore the significance of such change (Izutsu 2002; Steppat 1989; Tlili 2017a).

Be that as it may, the Qur'anic verse itself continues by explaining that God has "appointed livelihood" for humankind on earth. The verse thus seems merely to seek to remind humans that their ability to be functional and earn a living on earth is a grace from God. Remarkably as well, the verse proceeds to point out that humans rarely give thanks. Far from highlighting humans' special status, the verse seems rather to highlight their inherent vulnerability and utter dependence on God on one hand and their failure to show gratitude for God's grace toward them on the other. The ability to turn such criticism into something that bespeaks human privilege, whether attempted by Muslims or non-Muslims, seems remarkable.

Equating the notion of *amāna* with dominion is another awkward attempt to find a Qur'anic equivalent for the biblical notion. The word neither carries a connotation of authority nor, to my knowledge, has it ever been rendered as dominion prior to Capper's translation. As noted earlier, *amāna* simply means "trust". Although the verse does not specify the nature of this trust, a survey of exegetical literature shows that this notion has more often been understood as a burden than as a

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the translators adduce the medieval exegetical work *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* in support of this interpretation (Nasr et al. 2015), but this is a rather implausible interpretation of this *tafsīr*, which does not even comment on the meaning of *makkana* in this verse. The translators may have inferred this from al-Ṣuyūṭī's and al-Maḥallī's commentaries on the notion of *tamkīn* elsewhere in the Qur'an, but even this does not make their interpretation more plausible. Space limitations preclude a fuller treatment of this point in this article, but it is my hope to return to this point in a future project.

privilege: it is about the bargain of either believing in God and being righteous or failure thereof in return for eternal/long-term reward or punishment. Muslims who saw in the verse an element of human privilege had to grapple with the verse's negative comment that the human being proved to be "utterly unjust" and "utterly haughty" (*ẓalūm* and *jahūl*) for entering this momentous bargain. It should also be noted that although the verse highlights something that may be unique to humans—the fact that out of many creatures they alone jumped on *amāna*—the offer to carry this burden was given to other creatures before humans jumped on it. Humans are thus not that exceptional.

Similarly, the "fairest proportion" depiction can be treated as a sign of human exceptionalism only when taken out of context. The full passage where this phrase occurs says, "We have created the human being in the fairest proportion, *then reduced him to the lowest of the low*, save those who have believed and do righteous deeds, they shall have unlimited reward" (95/al-Tīn: 4–6; emphasis added). Clearly, then, whatever status can be inferred from the fourth verse in this passage is affected by the fifth one. Moreover, the comparison in this verse does not necessarily involve humans and other creatures. Many exegetes understand it in the sense that out of innumerable potential shapes in which God could have created the human being he chose for them the best possible one (Tlili 2014, p. 64). Seeing in the "fairest proportion" depiction a sign of human exceptionalism then treating this interpretation as a foundation for the principle of dominion can thus be achieved only through decontextualized and selective reading strategies. This, of course, is not to maintain that Islamic sources did not adduce these and other Qur'anic themes to corroborate anthropocentric claims, for they have. However, to equate the Qur'an with its interpretations and, even more problematically, to selectively treat the most anthropocentric interpretations as representative of this scripture's worldview while failing to even allude to readings that convey different perspectives even when the latter are more widely accepted betrays a preconceived insistence to treat the Qur'an as an anthropocentric text without much regard to what it actually says.

#### 4. Conclusions

Though un-exhaustive, I hope that the forgoing survey has illustrated some of the strengths and weaknesses of the current debate on animal ethics in Islam. At some level, this article may simply be a reminder of the value of scholarly rigor and of the need to consider how cultural and ideological biases can affect the quality of one's research. In its defensive attitude, the apologetic discourse has generally taken little notice of and barely benefited from the invaluable conceptual tools that have grown out of the current debate on animal ethics in Western scholarship. This results in two major problems. First, because the apologetic discourse is mostly descriptive it fails to discern the principles and ideals that underlie religious teachings on animals and to articulate an animal ethic that is intelligible across cultural boundaries. Second, the defensive attitude precludes the possibility of taking serious notice of the tradition's own shortcomings.

The animal advocacy discourse is similarly hampered by cultural and ideological biases. This is not to suggest that advocacy is inherently problematic. Nor is apologetic discourse for that matter. Indeed, both apology and advocacy are in some sense inevitable and desirable as they endow discourse with meaning. Rather, this is a problem because at its current stage much of the advocacy discourse does not adhere to the standards of scholarly rigor. This is clear not only in the methodological problems and factual inaccuracies highlighted earlier, but also in the unexamined colonial undertone of certain positions. One for example wonders what kind of criteria are adopted in assigning Egypt an "F" grade for its treatment of nonhuman animals. To what extent are such criteria shaped by Western worldviews, and what qualifies an organization that is inevitably shaped by one set of cultural ideals to serve in this universal capacity?

This article, however, hopes to be more than just such a reminder. Indeed, the forgoing discussion points to a consensus among informed observers that Islamic tradition has thought very deeply about the subject of animal ethics even if many remain dissatisfied with some of its positions. Muslims' attitudes toward animals have deteriorated in modern times and even the premodern tradition is guilty

of many imperfections, but overall, premodern Muslim scholars gave the subject utmost attention and developed a well-thought-out ethic. Even if many may continue to reject some of the tradition's positions, I believe that this ethic deserves serious attention and that it has much to contribute to the current debate. This is the case especially now with the so-called political turn, which focuses on animals' positive rights as opposed to the conventional rightist position which is mainly preoccupied with animals' negative rights (right to be free from harm). As some work has already started to show, premodern Islamic law developed a highly sophisticated and carefully thought-out model of such positive "rights", or rather protections (Tlili 2015). Modern ethicists could benefit from the Shāfi'ī and Ḥanbalī ethics models, as jurists from these two schools prioritize the interests of nonhuman animals nearly across the board (the notable exception pertains to the permissibility of killing for food, but again, such permissibility should be studied within a larger frame that thinks more deeply about the institution of domestication and related issues). Careful study of these models can thus be a great resource in modern debates.

The mechanisms and strategies used to inspire reverence for life and motivate compassion toward other creatures among Muslims—the type into which the early modern testimonies cited at the beginning of this article provide a glimpse—may even be worthier of study. Ample evidence indicates that up until a couple of centuries or even decades ago this ethic was still vibrant in Muslim lands (in some circles it continues to be so). Although many of the teachings that nurtured this ethic are time- and culture-contingent, understanding them can still be useful not only in formulating a coherent animal ethic, but also an effective one.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Anonymous. 1809. *Monthly Review* 59: 1–7.
- Arberry, Arthur. 1955. *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Asad, Muhammad. 2003. *The Message of the Qur'an*. Bristol: The Book Foundation.
- Bacon, Francis. 2010. Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature. Available online: <https://www.westegg.com/bacon/goodness.html> (accessed on 31 October 2017).
- Bacon, Francis, and Richard Whately. 1860. *Bacon's Essays: With Annotations*. London: John W. Parker and Son.
- Barstow, Geoffrey. 2017. *Food of Sinful Demons: Meat, Vegetarianism, and the Limits of Buddhism in Tibet*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bauckham, Richard. 2002. Joining Creation's Praise of God. *Ecotheology* 7: 45–59. [CrossRef]
- Benkheira, Mohammed Hocine, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, and Jacqueline Sublet. 2005. *L'animal en Islam*. Paris: Indes Savantes.
- Bentham, Jeremy. 1879. *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bergeaud-Blackler, Florence. 2016. Animal Rights Movements and Ritual Slaughtering: Autopsy of a Moribund Campaign. In *Islam and Public Controversy in Europe*. Edited by Nilüfer Göle. New York: Routledge, pp. 187–200.
- Berkowitz, Beth, and Marion Katz. 2016. The Cowering Calf and the Thirsty Dog: Narrating and Legislating Kindness to Animals in Jewish and Islamic Texts. In *Islamic and Jewish Legal Reasoning: Encountering Our Legal Other*. Edited by Anver Emon. London: Oneworld, pp. 61–111.
- Bousquet, Georges Henri. 1958. Des Animaux et de leur traitement selon le Judaïsme, le Christianisme et l'Islam. *Studia Islamica* 9: 31–48. [CrossRef]
- Capper, Daniel. 2016. *Learning Love from a Tiger: Religious Experiences of Nature*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Carson, James P. 2013. 'One of Folly's Puppies': Austen and Animal Studies. In *Global Jane Austen: Pleasure, Passion, and Possessiveness in the Jane Austen Community*. Edited by Laurence Raw and Robert G. Dryden. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 165–88.
- Crone, Patricia. 2004. *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Davis, Steven L. 2003. The Least Harm Principle May Require That Humans Consume a Diet Containing Large Herbivores, Not a Vegan Diet. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 16: 387–94. [CrossRef]
- Ḍayf, Shawqī, ed. 2003. *Al-Mujam al-wasīf*, 4th ed. Cairo: Maktabat al-Shurūq al-Dawliyya.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2008. *The Animal That Therefore I am*. Edited by Marie-Louise Mallet. Translated by David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Edmundson, William A. 2012. *An Introduction to Rights*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Elder, Glen, Jennifer Wolch, and Jody Emel. 1998. Le Pratique Sauvage: Race, Place, and the Human-Animal Divide. In *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands*. Edited by Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel. London: Verso, pp. 72–90.
- Evans, Edward Payson. 1906. *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*. London: William Heinemann.
- Fellenz, Marc R. 2010. *The Moral Menagerie: Philosophy and Animal Rights*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Foltz, Richard. 2006. *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Fortuny, Kim. 2014. Islam, Westernization, and Posthumanist Place: The Case of the Istanbul Street Dog. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21: 271–97. [CrossRef]
- Francione, Gary. 2000. *Introduction to Animal Rights: Your Child or the Dog*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ibn Al-Ḥajjāj, Muslim. 1991. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya.
- Ibn Āshūr, al-Ṭāhir. 1984. *Al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*. Tunis: al-Dār al-Tunusiyya lil-Nashr.
- Izutsu, Toshihiko. 2002. *Ethico-Religious Concepts of the Qurʾān*. Montreal: McGill.
- Izzi Dien, Mawil. 2000. *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press.
- Kemmerer, Lisa. 2006. *In Search of Consistency: Ethics and Animals*. Leiden: Brill.
- Landry, Donna. 2015. Horse-Human Companionship: Creaturely Cosmopolitanism across Eurasia. In *Cosmopolitan Animals*. Edited by Kaori Nagai, Karen Jones, Donna Landry, Monica Mattfeld, Caroline Rooney and Charlotte Sleigh. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 181–93.
- Lane, Edward. 1968. *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. Beirut: Librairie du Liban.
- Masri, al-Hafiz Basheer Ahmad. 2007. *Animal Welfare in Islam*. Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation. First published 1988.
- Mikhail, Alan. 2014. *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Milligan, Tony. 2010. *Beyond Animal Rights: Food, Pets and Ethics*. London: Continuum.
- Milligan, Tony. 2015. *Animal Rights: The Basics*. London: Routledge.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds. 2015. *The Study Quran: A New Interpretation and Commentary*. New York: HarperOne.
- Nelson, Lance E. 1998. *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Oldridge, Darren. 2005. *Strange Histories: The Trial of the Pig, the Walking Dead, and Other Matters of Fact from the Medieval and Renaissance Worlds*. London: Routledge.
- Perlo, Katherine Wills. 2009. *Kinship and Killing: The Animal in World Religions*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Plumwood, Val. 2002. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge.
- Al-Qarāla, Aḥmad Yāsīn. 2009. Ḥuqūq al-ḥayawān wa-ḍamānātuhā fi-l-fiqh al-islāmī Al-Majalla al-urduniyya fi-l-dirāsāt al-islāmiyya. 5: 23–45.
- Regan, Tom. 1983. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Al-Shaykhalī, Abd al-Qādir. 2006. Ḥuqūq al-ḥayawān wa-rīāyatuhu fi-l-islām. Irbid: Dār al-Kitāb al-Thaqāfi.
- Steppat, Fritz. 1989. God's Deputy: Materials on Islam's Image of Man. *Arabica* 36: 163–72. [CrossRef]
- Stilt, Kristen. 2008. *Animal Welfare in Islamic Law*. Cairo: Animal People.
- Stilt, Kristen. 2017. Constitutional Innovation and Animal Protection in Egypt. *Law and Social Inquiry* 42. [CrossRef]
- Stilt, Kristen. 2018. Animals. In *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Jarīr. 2008. *Jāmi al-bayān an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'an*. Cairo: Dār al-Jawzī.
- Tlili, Sarra. 2010. The Meaning of the Qurʾanic Word 'dābba': 'Animal' or 'Nonhuman Animal'? *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 12: 167–87.
- Tlili, Sarra. 2012. *Animals in the Qur'an*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tlili, Sarra. 2014. All Animals Are Equal, or Are They? The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' 's Animal Epistle and its Unhappy End. *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 16: 42–88. [CrossRef]

- Tlili, Sarra. 2015. Animal Would Follow Shāfiism: Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence to Animals in Medieval Islamic Thought. In *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur'ān to the Mongols*. Edited by Robert Gleave and István T. Kristó-Nagy. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 225–44.
- Tlili, Sarra. 2017a. From Breath to Soul: The Quranic Word *Rūḥ* and Its (Mis)interpretations. In *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought: Essays in Honor of Everett K. Rowson*. Edited by Joseph Lowry and Shawkat Toorawa. Leiden: Brill, pp. 1–21.
- Tlili, Sarra. 2017b. I Invoke God, Therefore I am: Creation's Spirituality and its Ecologic Impact in Islamic Texts. In *A Global History of Literature and the Environment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 107–22.
- Waldau, Paul. 1998. Islam. In *Encyclopedia of Animal Rights and Animal Welfare*. Edited by Marc Bekoff. Westport: Greenwood Press, pp. 291–92.
- Waldau, Paul. 2002. *The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wescoat, James, Jr. 1995. The 'Right of Thirst' for Animals in Islamic Law: A Comparative approach. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13: 637–54. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Al-Zajjāj, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm. 1988. *Maānī l-Qur'an wa-irābuh*. Beirut: Ālam al-Kitāb.



© 2018 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).