

THE ISLAMIC CODE OF ANIMAL-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

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Normally, the relationship between two parties is dictated by their appraisal of each other's worth and quality - resulting either in mutual esteem or otherwise. However, prejudices based on colour, creed or race often affect the process of logical reasoning. In the case of animals, speciesism is but an extension of such prejudices.

We often blame our early naturalists for not classifying animals as sentient beings, yet fail to see that we are doing no better in our time. Even these days animals are legally classified as agricultural products and stock-in-trade. Their status remains as 'objects' rather than as citizens-in-law. In spite of all the modern advances in neurophysics, we are still refusing to accept the fact that animals possess all those senses

which the human species possesses. In fact in some cases animal senses are more developed than similar senses in humans.

The most that many people concede to animals is 'instinct' - in the sense of natural impulses and involuntary prompting to action. The general impression is that they have no capacity for emotional states and no conscious mind. Humans continue to deny that animals too experience mental suffering and feel emotions such as joy, grief, love, affection, hate, anger etc; that they have the ability to communicate, analyse and resolve problems; that they, like human beings, have self-awareness. Not only that, but we know from thousands of years' experience of our relationships with domesticated animals that they also have altruis-

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tic characteristics - even for species other than their own. This spirit is governed by the same laws of genetic inheritance as that of the human species. Most of all, from the point of view of the Islamic religion, they do possess souls.

We are not concerned here with the gradation of souls, or with the measure of their evolutionary process in various species. The fact that there could be as many degrees of soul's development as there are classifications of animal species has no bearing upon the proposition that all living beings are endowed with a psychic force - a spiritualistic phenomenon, called soul. What concerns us here is the cardinal point - whether or not animals possess souls. This issue is the decisive factor when considering their status on earth and, hence, the criterion of our true-to-life relationship with them.

All the revealed religions have been telling us, for centuries, that each sentient being possesses a soul. Let us take the Islamic Scripture - the Qur'an - which was revealed about 1,400 years ago. The Arabic word for soul is 'Ruh'. Often it is translated as 'Spirit' when used for animals, to give the impression that animals do not possess the same kind of soul as human beings. According to such translators, animals have something lesser than a soul. According to the Qur'an, however,

all sentient beings are endowed with something more than just a spirit. They have been endowed with the Spirit of God which He breathes into every living being - whether man or animal. This Spirit of God or soul stands for moral power, apart from the emotional, intellectual, mental, or other such powers. When people generally talk of Spirit in relation to animals, they take it for granted that animals lack in moral power and, hence, they possess no soul. The Qur'an makes no such distinction between human and animal souls and calls all of them as God's Spirit.

The Qur'an further tells us that the souls of animals are immortal. If we accept the fact that the souls of animals are also the Spirit of God, then we have to accept that they too are immortal - because the Spirit of God never dies.

We also learn from the Qur'an that, like human souls, the souls of animals would be raised and gathered unto God after death and would be judged. Even the Old Testament tells us that their souls would be raised up to Heaven.¹ God certainly does not collect the rotting bones and flesh of dead creatures. His concern is only with souls, because souls are His Spirit. However, the concept that He gathers unto Himself the souls of animals to judge them poses the question that animals cannot be judged on moral grounds, because He has not given them the capacity to know the difference between virtue and evil in the sense of sin.

This question arises mainly because people generally confuse emotional, intellectual and mental powers on one hand and moral power on the other hand. Intellectual, mental and other such powers are the functions of our physical bodies, while moral power has its source from the Spirit of God which He breathes into each living being - including man and beast. The soul has its own existence - independent of a physical

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body. It is the intellectual and mental powers that cease to function at the time of physical death not the soul, which remains alive.

For example, no one doubts that a new-born baby has a soul, and it can be argued that an animal has more awareness than a new-born baby. There is no argument that can be put forward to assert the human soul and at the same time to deny souls to animals. Why then should we be surprised that the Qur'an and the other revealed Scriptures tell us that animals too have souls - just like the human species? Of course, there is bound to be a difference in the degree or quality of development between the souls of animals and the souls of human beings - just as there is always a difference of development between the soul of one person and that of another.

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We cannot go here into the details of how animals will be judged by God, after death. Suffice it to say that, according to the Qur'an, each individual soul would be judged according to its circumstances, its mental and other capacities and its intentions. Even in our worldly courts of law, we acknowledge the 'diminished responsibility' of a person under trial.

Perhaps now it will be easier for the reader to understand the following Qur'anic verses:

'There is not a single creature in heavens or the earth, but shall come unto God the Beneficent - in utter submission; He has included all of them in the reckoning, and assigned a number to each of them individually; They shall appear before Him on the Day of Resurrection - all on their own.' (19:93-95)

'Among His portents is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and of all beasts that He has dispersed therein; He has the power to gather them unto Himself - whenever He wills.' (42:29)

'Nothing in the heavens or the earth is hidden from your Lord - not even an object of atom's weight. There is not a particle even smaller or bigger than an atom, but is recorded in a manifest Book of His decrees.' (10:61)

The Arabic word for a being possessing soul (Zi ruhin) is 'Nafs'.

It is, however, generally misunderstood to apply to human beings only. The following saying of Prophet Muhammad leaves no doubt that the word 'Nafs' meaning 'soul' applies to animals also:

While enumerating the seven cardinal sins, the Holy Prophet named the sin of killing animals and quoted the following verse of the Qur'an to emphasize that animals too were included in the word 'Nafs'.²

'And kill not a 'Nafs' (a being with soul), which Allah has made sacrosanct - except for a justifiable reason.' (6:151 & 17:33).

Quite a few Muslim classical scholars have affirmed that animals do have souls, but people seldom have time to read such books these days. For example, one such scholar, Muwaffaq-ad-Din 'Abd-Allah, says this about animals possessing souls:

The Prophet forbade the killing of bees or of any captured livestock [in a war].... for they are animals with the Spirit of God [souls] in them.....³

The very logic of natural as well as of moral philosophy of animal-human relationship has to be based on the postulate that all living beings have been endowed with a touch of the Spirit of God, called soul. Without souls, animals would remain agricultural products and commercial commodities - and man will go on treating them as such.

The Qur'an tells us that each species of the animal kingdom is a 'community' in its own right and should be treated as such:

There is not an animal on earth, nor a bird that flies on its wing - but they are communities like you.....' (6:38)

Humans continue to deny that animals too experience mental suffering and feel emotions such as joy, grief, love, affection, hate, anger etc; that they have the ability to communicate, analyse and resolve problems; that they, like human beings, have self-awareness. Most of all, from the point of view of the Islamic religion, they do possess souls.

Furthermore, it invalidates various other misconceptions bearing upon the very deportment of animals - misconceptions which have always been the cause of man's mental reservations in his relationship with animals. For example, it tells us that they do possess the faculty of speech and that they are not 'dumb' neither in the physical nor the mental sense.⁴ 'Modern science has proved by extensive research that animals, birds, and even insects do convey their ideas and information to each other - if not in jointed words and syllables, at least in distinguishable and intelligible sounds.

Another serious misconception which the Qur'an has tried to put

In the final analysis, our relationship not only with animals but with ecology as a whole - whether purely subjective, realistic or pragmatic - has to be based on justice and equity. There can be neither justice nor equity in our relationship with other species as long as we go on sitting in judgement on them according to our human values and norms. In the words of the Qur'an, each species is a 'community' in its own right and should be allowed to lay down its own code of conduct and behaviour.

right is that animals do not possess the mental capacity to have a conscious and cognitive mind. Intellect, in simple words, is the faculty of knowing *a priori* principles. Even in modern psychology, intellect stands for the whole cognitive power of the mind - power to know, to judge, to comprehend and to perceive relationships. The very fact that all animal genera have been managing successfully, sometimes against very heavy odds, not only to survive but to lead an orderly communal life for millions of years, proves that they do possess the intellect to do so. The Qur'an, while telling us that animals too offer their prayers to God, says that they know what they are doing. The verse (24:41) makes it abundantly clear that

they do have the intellect to perform the act of prayer with a conscious mind.

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If we read the Qur'an in this context and go through the sayings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad carefully, we are left with no doubt that animals do possess all those faculties which the human species possesses. They have feelings, emotions, self-consciousness, capacity to love or hate.... and so on. As said before, the question of quantum or the degree of such faculties has no bearing upon the argument.

References

1. Ecclesiastes. 3:18-22
2. Al-Tirmidhi; Al-Nasai; Ahmad.
3. Al-Mughni-Muwaffaque-ad-Din 'Abd-Allah ibn Qudamah.
4. The Qur'an. 27:16. King Solomon knew the language of birds.

Courtesy - Animal Human Relationships: Some Philosophic Verses - A RSPCA publication.