

The Wisdom of Animals

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More than any other Muslim thinker, Ibn ‘Arabi dedicated his teachings to clarifying the presence of the divine wisdom in all things and the human necessity of conforming to that wisdom. The arguments he offers are at once metaphysical and scriptural, cosmological and psychological, scientific and ethical. He addresses every dimension of human and cosmic existence and speaks constantly of the inherent goodness of all of creation and the human duty to respect the rights (*huqūq*) of all creatures – not simply the rights of God and the rights of our fellow beings. If there is a single scriptural theme to his writings, after *tawhīd*, it is certainly the prophetic saying: “Give to each that has a right (*haqq*) its right”. He reads this in conjunction with the Quranic insistence that God created the universe and everything within it *bi’l-haqq*, that is, by means of and through the right, the real, the appropriate, the true. He understands this to mean that everything in the universe is right, true, and real. Human beings, however, are not necessarily given the insight to recognize the truth and rightness of all things. In order to achieve such recognition, they need prophetic guidance, and only then can they live a life that is right, true, and appropriate. That right and appropriate life demands that they respond rightly and appropriately to the rightness and appropriateness of all things – to the extent of human capacity. In other words, the divine wisdom that has created human beings has imposed upon them the duty of “giving to everything that has a right its right”.

One of the many sides to Ibn ‘Arabi’s project of clarifying the rights and truths of all things is cosmology, that is, the explication of the nature of the universe, with its diverse types and sorts of creatures. One should not, of course, confuse the traditional notion of cosmology with what goes by this name in modern times. Today, when scientists speak of cosmology, they mean physical cosmography – that is, the structure of the universe as

perceived by means of the technological tools and mathematical theories of modern physics. Physics can only deal with what is traditionally called the “visible” or “corporeal” realm, and the visible realm is the surface or skin of the cosmos. The cosmos, in Islamic terms, is not simply physical manifestation. Rather, the word *cosmos* (‘*ālam*) designates “everything other than God” (*mā siwa’llāh*). It follows that “cosmology” in the proper sense of the word must explain not only the nature of the visible realm (*shadāda*), but also that of the invisible realms (*ghayb*), which are infinitely more extensive than what we can perceive with our senses, even if these are aided by the most sophisticated instruments.

Ibn ‘Arabi’s most famous cosmological scheme is that of the Breath of the All-Merciful (*nafas al-rahmān*), in which he elucidates Quranic references to the speech of God. The Quran tells us in several verses that God brings things into existence simply by saying “Be!” to them, and that God’s words are in effect infinite – if all the oceans were ink, and all trees were pens, God’s words would not run out (Q. 18:109, 31:27). Ibn ‘Arabi explains God’s words on the analogy of our own words, which are also inexhaustible, at least potentially. We bring the words out from our awareness, just as God brings His words out from His infinite knowledge. We articulate words in our breath just as God articulates words in His All-Merciful Breath. Our words disappear as quickly as we utter them, just as God’s words are evanescent. “Everything perishes but His face”, says the Quran, and Ibn ‘Arabi insists that this rule applies to every moment of every existent thing. It follows that each moment of existence, each moment of each thing, is a new creation, a new articulation of the thing’s existence. Failing this new articulation, God’s words – the universe – would simply disappear, for nothing can exist without constant divine support.

Ibn ‘Arabi devotes Chapter 198 of *al-Futūhāt al-makkiyya*, one of the longer chapters of the book, to the Breath of the All-Merciful. He takes the Arabic alphabet as representing twenty-eight primordial divine letters. In order to create the cosmos, with all its invisible and visible levels, God composes words and sentences and books employing those twenty-eight letters. The outline of this

cosmological scheme is well known – Titus Burckhardt wrote a little book describing it many years ago. Each of the twenty-eight letters corresponds to several things, including one of the divine names and one category of creature. Some of the letters represent creatures that appear on the descending arc of existence, the movement from the invisible realms into the semi-visible realm of receptivity in which the visible cosmos is born. Other letters represent creatures that appear on the ascending arc of existence, which begins in visibility and then returns to the invisible realms of spirit and consciousness from which it arose. On this returning arc, the twenty-seventh letter represents human beings, and the twenty-eighth designates the stations and stages of perfection achieved by those human beings who enter into the presence of God. The twenty-sixth letter represents the jinn, and the twenty-fifth the angels, inasmuch as these are creatures that are present in the invisible realms of the returning arc. Letters 23 through 25 designate the visible creatures, that is, minerals, plants, and animals. Notice that modern cosmology deals almost exclusively with the twenty-third letter of the alphabet, the other twenty-seven letters lying outside the realm of its competence. This is why it hardly deserves the name “cosmology”.

Today I want to look at the twenty-fifth cosmic letter in an attempt to sum up Ibn ‘Arabi’s understanding of the role of animals in creation. In other words, what is the rightful and truthful situation of the animal realm? How can we as human beings give to animals their rights? Ibn ‘Arabi has a great deal to say about this issue, so I can only make a few quick comments. I am drawing from the section of Chapter 198 on the twenty-fifth letter, and from Chapters 357 and 372, both of which announce in their titles that they will address the nature of *bahā’im*, “the dumb beasts”.

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The word for animal in Arabic is *hayawān*, “living thing”. Given that each of the twenty-eight letters is governed by one specific divine name, one might guess that the divine name related to animals would be *al-hayy*, the Alive, or perhaps *al-muhyī*, “the

Life-Giver". This is not the case, however, and the reason is not too difficult to understand. Ibn 'Arabi tells us repeatedly that everything in the universe is in fact alive, but that the life of most things is hidden from our sight. This is so because life is presupposed by every divine quality. Knowledge, power, desire, mercy, justice, and so on have no meaning unless they are the qualities of something that is alive. In other words, God must be alive to know, desire, and act. It follows that life permeates all divine attributes. Hence, life also pervades all creatures, because creatures are simply the traces and properties of the divine names. Ibn 'Arabi writes,

The name Alive is an essential name of the Real – glory be to Him! Therefore, nothing can emerge from Him but living things. So, all the cosmos is alive, for indeed the nonexistence of life, or the existence of something in the cosmos that is not alive, has no divine support, but every contingent thing *must* have a support. So, what *you* consider to be inanimate is in fact alive. (*Futūhāt*, vol. 3, p. 324, line 20)

In Ibn 'Arabi's way of looking at the universe, all things are living words articulated in the Breath of the All-Merciful. This is to say that the divine life and the divine mercy are in fact the same thing. When God says in the Quran, "My mercy embraces everything" (6: 156), this means, according to Ibn 'Arabi, that "He has mercy on the cosmos through life, for life is the sphere of the mercy that embraces everything" (*Futūhāt* 2: 107. 25).

Elsewhere he explains that everything in the three visible realms – that is, minerals, plants, and animals – is under the control of the angels called "souls" (*nufūs*). By means of their souls, all creatures receive life from God and also know Him. People refer to things as "animals", that is, *hayawān*, "living things", only when they perceive the obvious signs of life. "But", says Ibn 'Arabi,

All are pervaded by life, so they speak the praise of their Creator from whence we do not hear. God teaches them things through their innate disposition (*fitra*) from whence we do not know. So there remains nothing wet or dry, hot or cold, inanimate, plant,

or animal, that does not glorify God with a tongue specific to its kind. (*Futūhāt* 2: 678. 14)

The universal glorification of God is a frequent theme in Ibn 'Arabi's writings. He takes the frequent Quranic references to the speech of things quite literally. In contrast to Muslim philosophers, theologians, and scientists, he makes no attempt to make a *ta'wīl* of these verses – that is, an “interpretation”, or an “explaining away” – by having recourse to notions of metaphor or symbolism. This points to one of his constant critiques of people who follow their “rational” understanding of things – that is, what we know as “common sense”. In the two chapters that talk about dumb beasts, Ibn 'Arabi devotes a good part of the discussion to showing that rational, commonsense interpretations of Quranic verses about the speech of inanimate things are misguided.

His basic argument against commonsense interpretations comes from two directions. First, in order to conclude that things do not talk, people have to claim that God does not mean what He says in the Quran. Second, Ibn 'Arabi and his peers – that is, those whom he commonly calls the “gnostics” (*'urafā'*) or “the folk of unveiling” (*ahl al-kashf*) – actually hear and understand the speech of all things, so they know by first-hand experience that everything is alive. They do not take God's words on faith.

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In both chapters on dumb beasts, Ibn 'Arabi explains why they have this name, *bahīma*, which the Arabic dictionaries define as quadruped or animal. Ibn 'Arabi suggests that we can understand the significance of the term if we remember that it derives from the same root as *mubham*, which means dubious, obscure, vague, unclear. For example, in Chapter 378 he writes,

Each created thing has a specific speech taught to it by God. It is heard by those whose hearing God has opened up to its perception. All movement and craftsmanship that become manifest from animals and do not become manifest save from a possessor

of reason, reflection, and deliberation, along with all the measures that are seen therein, signify that they have a knowledge of this in themselves. (*Futūhāt* 3:488.4)

Ibn ‘Arabi goes on to explain that animals perform many skillful deeds and construct marvelous things in a manner that suggests that they must be intelligent and rational. Yet observers cannot perceive any sort of rational faculty within them, so they remain puzzled as to how animals can do such things. This puzzlement, of course, has not been diminished by modern science, which still struggles to explain the multifarious skills of animals. So, Ibn ‘Arabi writes,

This may be why they are called “dumb beasts”, that is, because of the “obscurity” of the affair – except for us, because it is as clear as it can be. The obscurity that has overcome some people is because of their lack of unveiling in this, so they know the created things only in the measure of what they witness from them.

In continuing this discussion, Ibn ‘Arabi has recourse to a few Quranic verses to show that faith is on the side of those who witness the real nature of things through unveiling.

Even though the rational thinkers and the common people say that something in the cosmos is neither alive nor an animal, in our view God gave every such thing, when He created it, the innate disposition to recognize and know Him. Each is alive and speaks rationally in glorifying its Lord. The faithful perceive this through their faith, and the folk of unveiling perceive it in its actual entity. (*Futūhāt* 3:489.6)

As is always the case with Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, he soon gets around to explaining why we should be concerned about the fact that all things have knowledge from God and that all things express their knowledge through speech. Here I can mention one basic lesson, and this is that the awareness of all things should encourage us to have shame. “Shame” (*hayā’*) is not considered a great virtue nowadays in the West, but it certainly has had an honorable role to play in many civilizations, not least Islam. The Prophet said, “Every religion has its character trait [*khuluq*], and

the character trait of Islam is shame" (Ibn Māja, Zuhd 17). Shame is a close ally of *ihsān*, "doing the beautiful", which the Prophet described as "worshipping God as if you see Him". If one acts *as if* one sees God, shame will be a constant companion. And, if we understand that all things are aware and all have the ability to speak, this can only increase our sense of shame. Everything is watching us, and everything has the ability to speak to God about our activities. Ibn 'Arabi writes,

Someone may come to know that there is no existent thing that is not alive and speaking. In other words, there is nothing that is not a rational animal, whether it is called inanimate, plant, or dead. This is because there is nothing, whether or not it stands by itself, that does not glorify its Lord in praise, and this attribute belongs only to something that is described as alive.

Once someone comes to witness the life of all things, he will be full of shame, not only when he is in *jalwa*, that is, in public with other people, but also when he is in *khalwa*, that is, alone in a private retreat. He will see that in fact he is never alone, for he can never escape a location that surrounds him. And, even if he could escape his surroundings, he would still have shame before his bodily members and organs, for they are the means whereby he does what he does. He knows that on the Day of Resurrection, his bodily members will be called to witness, and they will bear witness truthfully. So, someone like this can never be in *khalwa*. "When someone achieves this state", Ibn 'Arabi writes, "he has joined the degree of the dumb beasts", who are aware of the presence of God.

In short, Ibn 'Arabi maintains that dumb beasts possess an exalted knowledge and understanding from God, and he concludes that anyone who considers himself superior to the beasts is ignorant of his own situation. He stresses that such ignorance is characteristic of the philosophical and theological approaches to Islamic learning – not to speak of the modern scientific disciplines. In short, his advice to his readers – if they are not among the folk of unveiling – is as follows:

Consider, O you who are veiled, how your level compares to that of the dumb beasts. The dumb beasts recognize you, they recognize that to which your situation will go back, and they recognize that for which you were created. But you are ignorant of all of this. (*Futūhāt* 3: 489. 29)

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Let me turn to a second topic that Ibn ‘Arabi commonly addresses when he talks about animals. This is related to the specific divine name that exercises its sway over the twenty-fifth letter of the Breath of the All-Merciful. This name is *al-mudhill*, the Abaser, which is typically contrasted with *al-mu‘izz*, the Exalter. People naturally assume that it is much better to be exalted than to be abased, but Ibn ‘Arabi wants to show that animals, who are ruled by the name Abaser, have a much more exalted position with God than most human beings. This is precisely because animals gladly accept their abasement, whereas human beings tend to forget that they are nothing in the face of God. They always want to be something, so they seek exaltation. By claiming to be what they are not, however, they fall into heedlessness and they rebel against their own God-given situation. Hence, the most exalted of all human beings in God’s eyes are in fact those who are the most abased before Him. Abasement at root is nothing other than *‘ubūdiyya*, the quality of being an *‘abd*, a servant or slave. That is why, in Ibn ‘Arabi’s reading, the most exalted of all human beings, the perfect human being, is also “the perfect servant” (*al-‘abd al-kāmīl*), that is, the most abased of all creatures before God.

In explaining the nature of abasement, Ibn ‘Arabi turns to the Quranic notion of *taskhīr*, “subjection”. It is God inasmuch as He is the Abaser who *subjects* some creatures to other creatures. In fact, Ibn ‘Arabi spends most of the section on animals in the chapter on the Breath of the All-Merciful unpacking and explaining the reality of subjection. He begins the section like this:

God says, “We abased [the cattle] to them, and some of them they ride, and some they eat” [36: 72]. He also says, “He subjected to you everything in the heavens and everything in the earth, all from Him” [45: 13], so animals are included in this. This is the ruling

property of the name Abaser in the cosmos... God made some of them subjected to others through the name Abaser.... He says, "He has elevated some of them over others in degrees so that some of them may take others in subjection" [43:32]. (*Futūhāt* 2:465.12)

Ibn 'Arabi continues this discussion by pointing out that subjection is two-sided. In other words, when something is subjected to you, you are subjected to it. He explains how this works with the example of a king and his subjects. The Quranic verse just cited says that God has elevated some over others with the "degree" (*daraja*) that He has given them. In the case of a king, God has given him the degree of kingship, and this degree allows him to rule over others. The king subjects his citizens precisely because of the degree, and hence the citizens are abased before the king and must do what he commands. However, it works the other way too, for, as Ibn 'Arabi says, "Among the divine names, the Abaser rules over both sides". He writes,

The degree of the citizens and the subjects requires that they subject the king to themselves, for he must guard and defend them, fight against their enemies, judge disputes among them, and seek their rights [*huqūq*]. (*Futūhāt* 2:465.22)

Ibn 'Arabi then points out that subjection also applies to the relationship between God and man. The name Abaser rules over both sides. Although man is abased before God, God is also abased before man. This is a version of Ibn 'Arabi's famous discussion of the mutual relationship between Lord (*rabb*) and vassal (*marbūb*), or the God (*ilāh*) and that which is "godded over" (*ma'lūh*). His explanation runs like this:

God says, "He is God in the heavens and in the earth" [6:3]. He says, "He subjected to you what is in the heavens and what is in the earth, all together" [45:13]. Luqman said to his son, "O my son, if it should be but the weight of one grain of mustard-seed, and though it be in a rock, or in the heavens, or in the earth, God shall bring it forth" [31:16], for God is in the earth, He is in heaven, He is in the rock, and He is with us wherever we are. The Creator is never separate from the created thing, nor is the Abaser separate from

the act of abasing. If the two were to be separate, this description would be separate from God, and the name would disappear.

Ibn 'Arabi then explains that when God says in the Quran, "I created jinn and mankind only to worship Me" [51:56], this means that He created them to abase themselves before Him, so He created them with the name Abaser. At the same time, God describes how He guards over all things and preserves all things. Like the king in the example, God's *degree* of Godliness subjects Him to what the cosmos seeks from Him, that is, the preservation of its existence.

In continuing his argument, Ibn 'Arabi explains that God abases human beings by placing within them the attributes of poverty, indigence, and need. As the Quran says, "O people, you are the poor toward God, and God – He is the Rich, the Praiseworthy" (35:15). Because of their need, people then become abased before anything in which they see what they need, and everything needs something else. The cosmos is filled with mutual need, which is in fact the need of all things for God, whose attributes are displayed in the needed objects. It follows that it is need that ties all of existence together. The well-being (*salāh*) of the entire cosmos depends upon need. So, Ibn 'Arabi concludes, with perhaps a touch of hyperbole,

No other name bestows general well-being on the cosmos like the name Abaser, and there is nothing in the Divine Presence that has a property like this name. Its property permeates this world and the next world constantly. When the Real allows one of the gnostics to witness it and when He discloses Himself to the gnostic within it and from it, there is no one among God's servants more felicitous than he, and no one with more knowledge of God's mysteries through unveiling. (*Futūhāt* 2:466.3)

As for the rest of us, the lesson we need to learn from the mutual abasement of all things is to understand who we are in the cosmic economy. We should never overestimate our own worth. We should not consider ourselves exalted, because in fact we are abased before the divine power. Ibn 'Arabi explains this in one of the chapters on the dumb beasts:

Know that even though God has subjected and abased the dumb beasts to man, you should not be heedless of the fact that you are subjected to them. You look to their well-being by watering and feeding them, by cleaning their places, by coming into contact with dung and waste because of them, and by protecting them from the heat and cold that harm them. This and similar things are because the Real has subjected you to them and has placed need for them in your soul. ...

So, you have no superiority over them through subjection, for God has made you more needy of them than they are needy of you. Do you not see how God's Messenger became angry when he was asked about the stray she-camel? He said, "What is she to you? She has her feet and her stomach. She will find water and eat from the trees until her master finds her" (Muslim, Luqta 1).

So, God did not make the animals needy toward you, but He placed within you the need for them. All dumb beasts that have the means to flee from you will do so, and this is only because they have no need for you, and they have been given the innate knowledge that you will harm them. The fact that you search for them and that you exert effort in acquiring things from them shows that you are needy toward them.

By God, when the dumb beasts have more independence than you, how can it occur to you that you are superior to them? Very true are the words of him who said, "No man will be destroyed if he knows his own worth". (*Futūhāt* 3:490.10)

