

## Ethical Rights of Animals in Islam

**Soraya Ghotbi**

Associate Professor, Shahed University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail:  
sghotbi@shahed.ac.ir.

### **Abstract**

The Islamic tradition includes teachings on animal rights, including the rights of quadrupeds, birds, and insects, which the Muslims are required to observe. According to these teachings, those who violate these rights and behave aggressively towards animals will be held responsible before their Creator and will face the consequences of their wrong actions. This article is an attempt to study the ethical rights of animals in the Quran and jurisprudential traditions and to show the roles of these two sources in emphasizing the ethical rights of animals. The findings of the research indicate that the ethical rights of animals in the Quran and jurisprudential traditions encompass different aspects of their existence, including but not limited to the right to life, nutrition, health, and reproduction.

**Keywords:** Islam, Ethical rights, The Quran, Jurisprudential traditions, Animal rights.

## **Introduction**

The issue of animal rights is a fundamental topic in ethical rights. Though attention has been paid to the ethical rights of animals in monotheistic religions, increasing cruelty towards animals in contemporary times has called for further attention to this significant issue. Hunting animals with the motivation of recreation, sexual utilization, destruction of animal habitats, laboratory tests on animals, commercialization of rare species, and damages resulting from environmental pollution are among the challenges of contemporary times in interaction with animals. The significance of this issue increases even more when we see today videos of cruel animal abuse circulated on social media. Concerning the ethical rights of animals, the important question is what roles the Quran and jurisprudential traditions play in emphasizing the ethical rights of animals.

A survey of Islamic teachings reveals that Islam pays special attention to the ethical rights of animals. According to Talebi, the idea, propounded by some Western thinkers, that animals are not members of the moral society has been a ground for denying animal rights (Talebi 2013, 316). It is worth saying that the ethical society from the viewpoint of Michael Fox is a society in which independent and autonomous creatures could understand ethical concepts and consider them as a scale for the evaluation of their own behavior. According to Fox, an ethical society is a society in which there is a mutual understanding of autonomy and personhood (Fox 1986b, 50).

In response to the question why an animal is not considered a member of the ethical society but a human is considered a member of the ethical society, Fox says that human beings are autonomous and self-aware. Furthermore, they are able to understand difficult concepts, use language, and design, and they can choose and accept

the responsibility of their actions. For this reason, human beings are considered members of the ethical society but animals are not considered so. Less than one year later, Fox renounced his view (Fox 1986a, 10) and extended the duties of basic human ethics to refraining from hurting others including animals (Fox 1987, 56-57, 60).

Some think that reason is a criterion of having rights. According to this view, because animals do not have reason, they have no rights (Linzey 1976, 24). Others have considered standards such as ethical responsibility taking, having culture, and social communication as the standards for having rights (Frey 1977a, 187). Another basis for denying animal rights is the inability of animals to own. The opponents of animal rights believe that a creature can have a right only if it can acquire the ownership of something or be able to enjoy a profit from something. As animals are neither owners of anything nor able to profit from anything, they are not entitled to have rights (McCloskey 1965).

However, according to the monotheistic view of Islam, God is the owner of the universe, and the whole world, including animals, is created by God. Therefore, man, who is God's vicegerent on earth, is responsible for all creatures, including animals, and will be accountable before God for the way he treats animals. In this regard, Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, "Fear God and be virtuous, because in the presence of God, you are responsible for the servants, towns, and villages. You will be asked about residences and animals" (Nahj al-balagha, sermon 167). On the other hand, according to the Quran, animals are intelligent, and their intelligence is a basis for their ethical rights. Quran 27:18 reports a conversation between ants, and 27:24-26 indicates that a hoopoe was able to understand the beliefs of

those who prostrated themselves before the sun instead of God and could explain the reason of its absence to Solomon: “But the hoopoe did not stay away long, then he said: I have seen what you do not know, and I have come to you from Sheba with news which is certain. I found them ruled by a woman, and she was given all possessions, and she had a great throne” (Quran 27:22-23). Another sign of animal intelligence is their ability to learn, about which the Quran says, “All the good things have been made lawful for you, and what the trained dogs and birds catch, you teach them from what God teaches you. So eat from what they have captured for you and mention God's name upon it” (Quran 5:4). In addition, birds would glorify God together with David (Quran 21:79), which shows their intelligence and special place in the system of creation.

### **The Right to Life**

In several hadiths, killing animals without a justifiable reason is declared prohibited. According to a hadith, the Prophet (s) considered killing quadrupeds unjustly to be a major sin (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2008, 4:270); he banned killing even an ant (Majlisi 1983, 61:247). Imam al-Sadiq (a) also reportedly counted killing animals among the most detested sins (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2010, 4:270). According to another hadith, the Prophet (s) warned that whoever targets a living creature, God will curse him (Majlisi 1983, 61:282).

It is important to note that in Islam, the right of animals to life is not an absolute right that could not be altered under any conditions. Animals' right to life is respected within the limits of reason and Islamic law. The Quran, for instance, has authorized slaughtering some kinds of animals in order to provide food for humans. Offering animal sacrifices is also a part of the rituals of hajj (Quran 2:196).

There is clear evidence according to which those who violate animals' right to life deserve punishment. For example, Imam Ali (a) reportedly punished a person who had killed an animal without any reason. On this basis, in jurisprudential traditions, hunting animals for pleasure is not permitted and travelling for this kind of hunting is considered a sinful travel. Killing some kinds of animals, such as hounds, also leads to financial penalties (Hurr al-'Amili 1994, 11:536).

### **Right to Nutrition and Health**

According to Islamic teachings, an important animal right is the right to nutrition. We read in the Quran: "So eat yourself and pasture your cattle. Surely there are many Signs in this for people of understanding" (20:54). In hadiths also, providing food for animals is considered a basic task of the owners of animals, so much so that it is introduced as an instance of almsgiving. Owning a fat animal is deemed a sign of the righteousness of the owner (Hurr al-'Amili 1994, 11:427). The Prophet (s) reportedly said, "A woman was sentenced to hellfire by God, because she tied up a cat and did not permit it to go for its food, which led to its death" (Muhammadi-Rayshahri, 12:411).

If the owners of an animal ignore their responsibility and leave the animal without food, their ownership will be invalid. Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said in this regard, "Such an animal belongs to the person who attends to its needs, so that it can survive" (Tusi 1987, 6:393). Also, with regard to a man who had left an animal, the Imam said that if the animal was left in a secure place with water and grass, it belonged to the one who had left it, but if the animal was left in a place without water and grass, then the animal would belong to the person helps it to survive (Tusi 1987, 6:393). This shows that nutrition

is an animal right, and even if the owner of an animal refuses to attend to this need, that would not deprive the animal of this right. Jurists have mentioned that if an owner refuses to give sustenance to his animal, the ruler has to force them to do so (‘Amili 1992, 2:145).

Thus, in Islamic jurisprudence, animals’ right to nutrition has been a basis of certain religious rulings. For instance, al-Shaykh al-Tusi writes, “Whenever a person becomes the owner of an animal, he has to provide food for it. In this ruling, there is no difference between animals whose meat can be eaten or those whose meat cannot be eaten; and birds and non-birds are equal” (Tusi 1987, 8:47).

Concerning food and drink, al-Shahid al-Thani writes, “As it is necessary to pay for the cost of the sustenance of human beings, it is obligatory to do the same for the survival of an animal, even if the animal belongs to another person” (‘Amili 1993, 32:32). In addition, if a person has a limited amount of water for ablution, whilst their animal is thirsty, they should give that water to the animal and perform *tayammum* (‘Amili 1992, 1:112).

It is worth stating that although in Islam the right of ownership is respected and nobody has a right to take a person’s assets without his or her permission, if one knows that the life of an animal is in danger and the animal owner is not able to provide forage for the animal or the forage is with a person who refuses to sell it, the animal owner can force the holder of the forage to give it to the animal and then give back an equal amount of forage or its price to the holder of forage, just as when a human’s life is at risk (Hurr al-‘Amili, 8:503).

But is there any limitation to the right of animals to nutrition, or is there no specific limit and it depends on the animals’ need? Based on jurisprudential traditions, the sustenance of an animal includes water and food and a proper shelter, and it does not have a specific

limitation; rather, the quantity and quality of the nutrition is subject to the needs of the animal in question, which differs in different times and places.

Paying attention to animals' health is another task, which has been emphasized in Islamic laws. Based on legal traditions, prevention of contagious diseases to preserve animals' health is obligatory. The Prophet (s) is reported to have said, "Do not place a sick animal near a healthy animal, because the disease may be contracted by the healthy animal" (Hurr al-'Amili 1994, 11:507). Thus, receiving healthy food materials is another animal right; the Prophet is reported to have said, "The one who cleans a stream, by which they want to feed the horse and then feed it, will be granted a good reward by God for each stream they clean". (Majlisi 1983, 64:177).

Observing environment health is another right of animals. Based on hadiths, any place where animals are kept should be clean. For example, Imam al-Sadiq (a) quotes the following instruction from the Prophet (s): "Keep sheepfolds clean, and also clean their sheep's nasal mucus" (Hurr al-'Amili 1994, 5:3). In addition to this, the Prophet (s) stated, "Whoever takes a horse to a resting place for the sake of God and feeds it with water and forage and sweeps the stall will be rewarded ... on the Day of Judgment" (Majlisi 1983, 64:165).

Health is another animal right which needs to be respected. Shahid Thani, among other jurists, writes, "Medicine that an animal needs for a disease is among the ethical rights of animals" ('Amili 1413 AH, 5:88) Other jurisprudents have considered the provision of medicine and treatment for animals to be obligatory (e.g., Bahrani 1405 AH, 23:831).

### **The Right to Reproduction**

The right to reproduction is another animal right in Islam. Animals have the right to reproduce freely. This is a natural right granted to them by God, and castrating animals is considered, in Islamic traditions, a detested act (Barqi 1991, 2:634). For this reason, some Muslim jurists have issued fatwas on the prohibition or disapproval of castrating animals without any justifiable reasons (Mubarkfuri, n.d., 8:31). In Islam, animal health precedes its exploitation, and humans can use animals as long as they do not endanger their health.

### **The Right to Use Perceptive Faculties**

One of the ethical rights of animals in Islam is the right to use perceptive faculties. Based on the traditions, animals can perceive many things, including their Creator (Hurr al-'Amili 1994, 11:479-81). Although this perception differs from human perception, it can be said that animals hold a level of consciousness and understanding beyond instinctual drives; according to the Quran, all creatures, including animals, praise God (e.g., 17:44, 22:18, 24:41).

Considering this, it can be said that animals have specific perceptive faculties. Having these faculties and the related organs, which allow animals to enjoy more in their lifespan and avoid what may threaten their survival, is among the definite rights of animals. If anyone, in any way, deprives an animal of its organs, they have violated that animal's rights. For this reason, in Islamic traditions, removing the organs of animals has been prohibited. The holy Prophet of Islam stated, "The curse of God be upon the individual who mutilates an animal" and "Do not dismember an animal even if it is a biting dog" (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2008, 12:409).

### **The Right to Fair Usage**

Another animal right is the right to being used fairly. Those who work with animals should treat them properly while using them. Making animals work more than is in their capacity is a kind of oppression, and for this reason, in the Islamic tradition, it has been emphasized that animals should be treated and used fairly, and imposing works on them beyond their capacity is prohibited (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2008, 12:409). Also, the Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “Whoever gets off his horse on a road and walks behind it is like one who sets a slave free for the sake of God” (Muttaqi Hindi 2003, 4:69) and “God curses the third person who rides on the back of an animal” (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2008, 12:410).

The right of animals to being used fairly is not limited to the above-mentioned cases. According to a hadith, the Prophet (s) ordered that animals should be taken in smooth roads (Muttaqi Hindi 2003, 5:62). Also, those who make quadrupeds walk fast and tired are thus warned that their prayers and hajj will not be accepted (Moghimi-Haji 2007). The Prophet (s) also said, “Do not use them as a seat when you give a speech or during your conversations in streets and markets” (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2008, 12:408). It is interesting to know that attention has been paid in the hadiths to the quality of sitting on the animals and the way of putting loads on them; people are instructed not to sit or put loads on the quadrupeds without creating a balance of weight (Hurr al-‘Amili 1994, 11:541).

Sexual utilization of animals is also forbidden in Islamic laws and traditions. In a tradition from the Prophet (s), it has been said that one who sexually harasses an animal will be cursed by God (Kulayni 2008, 3:671). Also, the meat and milk of the animal which has been

sexually harassed is declared to be forbidden (Kulayni 2008, 12:263).

### **The Right to Mental Health and Well-Being**

As was pointed out earlier, according to Islamic teachings, animals have consciousness and perception, which allow them to have an understanding of their surroundings. Animals can also experience mental suffering and pain. Because of that, torturing animals and inflicting pain and suffering on them is prohibited in the Islamic tradition. Imam Ali (a), for instance, ordered one of his administrators to tell those who take care of animals not to separate camels and their young. Also, he ordered them to observe the conditions of the animal which has recently given birth and avoid milking it to the extent that no milk remains for their young (Nahj al-balagha, letter 25). Another disturbing behavior which the Islamic tradition requires the Muslims to refrain from is depriving animals of tranquility at night. According to a hadith, the Prophet (s) prohibited people from going near birds at night and disturbing their peace (Kulayni 2008, 12:122).

One of the other damaging behaviors is not observing the laws related to animal slaughtering. While slaughtering an animal, care should be taken that the other animals do not witness the slaughtering. Imam ‘Ali (a) is reported to have said that a sheep must not be slaughtered before the eyes of other sheep or a camel before the eyes of other camels (Hurr al-‘Amili 1994, 24:16). This tradition shows the feelings of animals towards each other and suggests that, from the point of view of Islam, animals must not be mentally abused. Moreover, according to the Islamic tradition, when slaughtering an animal, a sharp knife should be used, and the knife should not be displayed to the animal; the Prophet is reported to have said, “Sharpen the knife for slaughtering and stand far from the eyes of other

animals” (Wazirifard and Oliaei 1393 Sh, 224). Thus, if there is a need to slaughter an animal, that action should be done quickly. According to a hadith, the Prophet (s) saw a man who had put his foot on the chest of a sheep and was sharpening his knife while the animal was looking at him; the Prophet told him, “Could you not sharpen your knife earlier? Perhaps you intend to take the life of this animal twice?” (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2008, 12:413). For this reason, the Prophet (s) emphasized the importance of slaughtering in a proper and good manner. Another instruction in the Islamic tradition is that the skin of animals should not be removed from their body immediately after slaughtering. If an animal is slaughtered and all or part of its skin is removed before it is actually dead, eating the meat of that animal will become unlawful (Hurr al-‘Amili 1994, 24:17).

Another disapproved act, according to the Islamic tradition, is the slaughtering of an animal by the person who has reared it. According to a hadith, a person asked Imam al-Sadiq (a), “[Is it alright that] a man feeds one or two sheep to slaughter them in the ritual sacrifice?” The Imam replied, “I do not like this action.” The man said, “[What about] a person [who] buys a camel or a sheep and provides forage for it from here and there until the time of slaughtering arrives and then cuts off their heads?” The Imam said, “Whenever the time comes for such an action, he should go to the market of Muslims, buy an animal, and slaughter it” (Hurr al-‘Amili 1994, 16:308).

Another brutal behavior is to paralyze an animal prior to slaughtering them. Imam al-Sadiq (a) stated, “When slaughtering an animal, do not cut its spinal cord before it dies; you may do that after its death” (Kulayni 2008, 12:168). To play off animals against each other is another disapproved act in the Islamic tradition. Ibn Abbas

reports that the Prophet (s) prohibited people from playing off animals against each other (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2008, 12:410). Branding livestock is another action which has been condemned in Islam; it is reported that when the Prophet (s) saw a donkey with a brand on its face, he said, “Have not you heard that I cursed the one who brands an animal on its face?” (Muhammadi-Rayshahri 2008, 12:410)

### **Conclusion**

Ethical rights of animals are emphasized in the Quran and jurisprudential traditions. These rights derive from the Islamic monotheistic worldview, in which human beings are responsible before God for the way they treat His creatures, including animals. If humans harm other creatures or fail to fulfill their duties toward them, they will be condemned to divine punishment. Based on the evidence presented in this study, the instructions found in the Islamic tradition concerning the ethical rights of animals not only include physical aspects, such as nutrition and health, but also mental and emotional aspects, such as the prohibition of separating a baby animal from its mother and slaughtering an animal before the eyes of other animals.

### References

- ‘Amili, Zayn al-Din ibn ‘Ali al-. 1992. *Al-Rawda al-bahiyya fi sharh al-Lum‘a al-Dimashqiyya*. Qom: Daftar Intisharat Islami.
- ‘Amili, Zayn al-Din ibn ‘Ali al-. 1993. *Masalik al afham ila tanqih Shara‘i‘ al-Islam*. Institute of Islamic Studies.
- Bahrani, Yusuf al-. 1405 AH. *Al-Hada‘iq al-nadirah*. Qom: Intisharat Jami‘a Mudarrisin.
- Barqi, Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-. 1991. *Al-Mahasin*. Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya.
- Fox, Michael. 1986a. “Author Reverses Views on Animal Rights.” *The Scientist* (December 15): 10.
- Fox, Michael. 1986b. *The Case for Animal Experimentation: An Evolutionary and Ethical Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fox, Michael. 1987. “Animal Experimentation: A Philosopher Changing Views.” *Between the Species* 3 (2): 55-82.
- Frey, R. G. 1977. “Animal Rights Analysis.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (108): 254-59.
- Hurr al-‘Amili, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-. 1994. *Wasa‘il al-Shi‘a*. Bairut: Dar Ihya‘ al-Turath al-‘Arabi.
- Kulayni, Muhamamd ibn Ya‘qub. 2008. *Al-Kafi*. Qom: Dar al-Hadith.
- Linzey, Andrew. 1976. *Animal Rights: A Christian Assessment of Man’s Treatment of Animals*. London: SCM Press.
- Majlisi, Muhammad-Baqir. 1983. *Bihar al-anwar*. Beirut: Dar Ihya‘ al-Turath al-‘Arabi.
- Masoudi, Asghar. 2012. “A Comparative Study of Treatment of Animals in Islamic Ethics and Western Secular Ethics with an Emphasis on World Deceleration of Animal Rights.” Ph.D. diss., University of Quran and Hadith (Qom, Iran).
- McCloskey, H. J. 1965. “Rights.” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (59): 115-27.

- Moghimi-Haji, Abolghsem. 2007. "Animal Rights in Islamic Jurisprudence." *Fiqh-e-Ahl-e Bayt* 48: 138-95.
- Mubarkfuri, Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Rahman. n.d. *Tuhfat al-ahwadhi bi sharh Jami' al-Tirmidhi*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- Muhammadi-Rayshahri, Mohamamd. 2008. *Wisdom Letter of the Grand Prophet (s)*. Qom: Dar al Hadith.
- Muhammadi-Rayshahri, Mohamamd. 2010. *Mizan al-hikma*. Qom: Dar al-Hadith.
- Muttaqi Hindi, Ali ibn Hisam al-Din. 2003. *Kanz al-'Ummal*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- Talebi, Mohammad Hossein. 2013. "Criticism and Review of the Reasons for Rejecting and Proving the Animal and Plant Rights in Western and Islamic Cultures." *Legal Research Quarterly* 63: 307-39.
- The Quran. Translated by Ali Quli Qarai.
- Tusi, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-. 1987. *Al-Mabsut fi fiqh al-Imamiyyah*. Tehran: Al-Maktabat al-Murtadawiyya.
- Wazirifard, Seyed Mohammad Javad, and Ahmad Oliaei. 1393 Sh. "Slaughter and Hunting from the Perspective of Animal Rights in Shiite Jurisprudence." *Shi'a shinasi* 12 (47): 201-31.