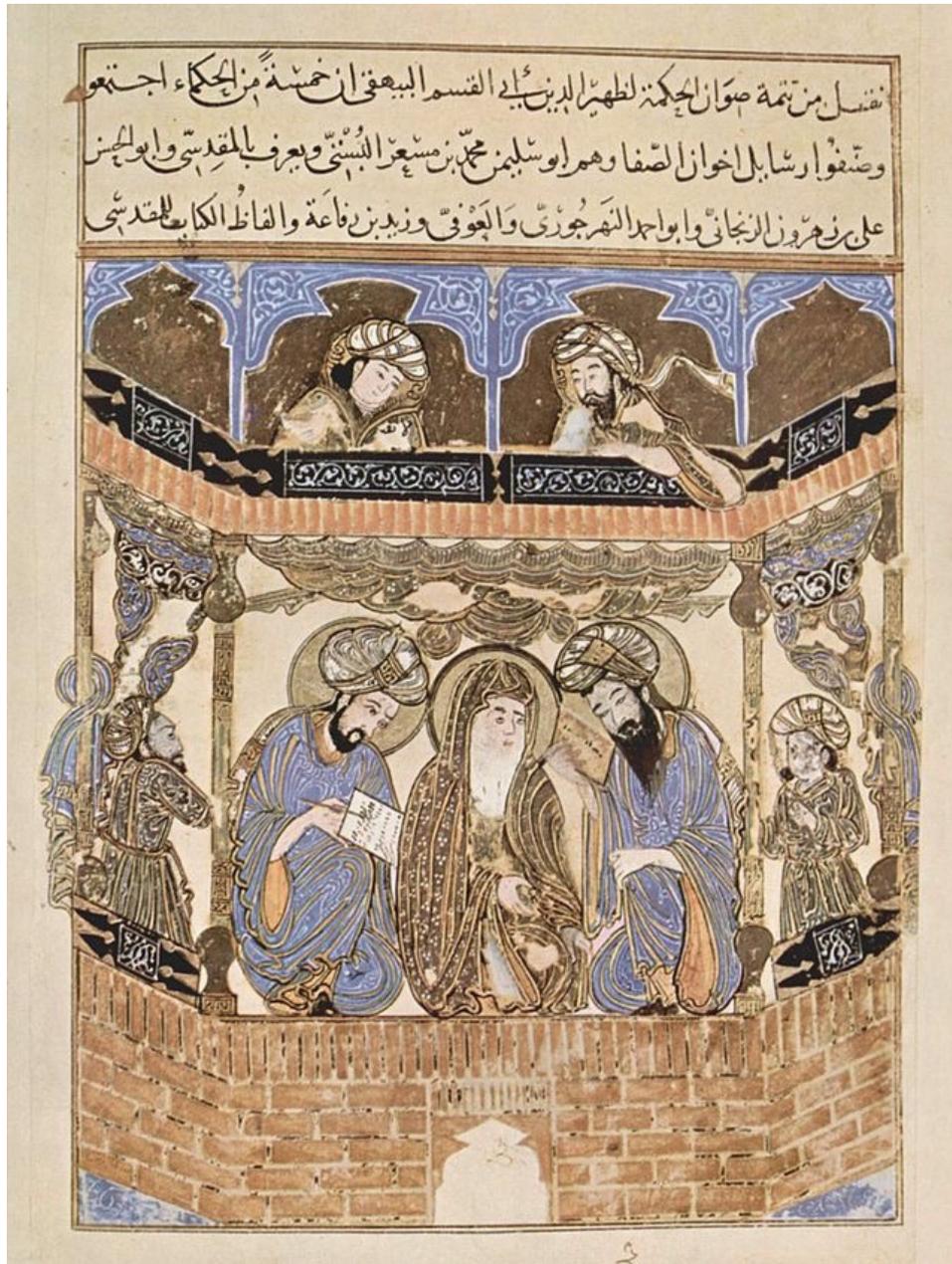


On Perfection and Diversity in the Writings of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā

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The Brethren of Purity¹

Abstract

¹http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Brethren_of_Sincerity#mediaviewer/File:Irakischer_Maler_von_1287_001.jpg

The growing power of communication and information technologies and their reliance on systems, poses great challenges to cultural and religious diversity, and even education. Will these technological systems continue to homogenize cultures and religions? Will this process lead to increasing strife? Or is there a possibility of maintaining both identity and diversity in a peaceful manner? This paper explores an early attempt to consider this problem. It will focus on the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā and their attempt to construct an encyclopedic system to coordinate knowledge during the flowering of Islamic Civilization in the tenth century. It will primarily deal with Epistle or Rasā'il twenty-two – a fable concerning a debate between the humans, the animals and the Jinn. It will discuss their debate and show how the major concern for the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā was not only to embrace the diversity of knowledge but also the need to navigate through this diversity. I would like to suggest through this analysis that a culture gains its richness and identity by recognizing perfections outside of their own identity. This is analogous to the way that the individual human being gains meaning and dignity by reaching beyond its individuality. It also shows the importance of cultural and religious diversity and how the world cannot be unified by a single all-encompassing system. This approach is important because it shows the possibility of maintaining cultural and religious identity while participating in a technological world involving the flow of information on one hand, and global cultural diversities on the other.

Keywords: Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, perfection, diversity, culture, religion, animality.

Introduction

And your Lord inspired to the bee, 'Take for yourself among the mountains, houses, and among the trees and [in] that which they construct. Then eat from all the fruits and follow the ways of your Lord laid down [for you].'

How are we to consider the globe? – as a smooth uninterrupted surface which unites us all, and unites all knowledge, or perhaps as a fractured series of territories which are played against one another for profit?

We have unlimited knowledge at the touch of our hands. From every culture, from every historical period, and every event seen from a variety of perspectives. And this great ocean of the internet is something that meets us regardless of what shore we stand.

But what is the significance of this development and where will it lead us? Will we all become in-formed by this same pool of information? Will this trend continue to the point where cultural and religious differences are eroded away? Or will sharp fissures and differences intensify themselves across which missiles will be constantly launched.

This is a very serious problem. When you look at the conflicts in the world today, they are geopolitical conflicts involving the control of territory, resources and

information. Often fissures or unities between religions and cultures are artificially created to facilitate this control. And through the media, the conflicts in the world are often disguised as conflicts involving religious identity, human rights and democracy. Our very ideals or what we might call perfections are being used to deceive us.

On the great rivers and seas of information it is important to know the currents and the art of navigation. But there were others in a similar situation before us.

The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā

The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā or the Brethren of Purity were a group in the tenth-century who appeared during the period of the collecting and coordinating of the wisdom of the ancient world. The Abbasids a century earlier began the process of translating many Greek scientific and philosophical works into Arabic. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā began to collect this information in their Epistles [Rasā'il] and theorize about how one should coordinate or synthesize this knowledge. On how to recognize the benefits and the dangers. This is particularly important for us. Faced with present day information technology, media, marketing and political distortions, we are in fact in a similar situation.

Among the Epistles of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā is number twenty-two concerning a debate between the animals and human beings. This is an extension of a fable from a previous Epistle about how a group of human travelers who were shipwrecked on the island of the animals and began to enslave them. The animals go to the King of the Jinn, Bīwarāsp the Wise, to ask to be released from this servitude. The work recounts the trial of the animals against their human controllers. It begins with a clear statement of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's beliefs.

Praise beyond measure is due to that self-existent Being, who conferred various forms on all created bodies, notwithstanding the singleness of the (composing) matter, and who, organizing the human species, bestowed distinct powers on each individual.²

In the work, a delegate for the human beings will argue for their superiority over the animals, and as justification for their enslavement of animals. After each human speech, one of the delegates from the animals gives a counter argument. In the initial argument the humans claim that it is natural to rule over the animals because they submit themselves to human control. They give the example of the horse. But the ass comes to the horse's defense.

You should not be too reproachful. No creature is granted so many gifts and virtues as not to lack something greater, and none is deprived of at least some special gift. God's bounties are many. No one individual can compass them all, and no species or kind engrosses all God's goodness. God's bounty, rather, is shared by all creatures in greater or lesser proportion. But the clearer

² This is from the earlier translation *Ikwānu-S-Safa or Brothers of Purity*. translated from the Hindustani of Maulavi Ikram 'Ali, by John Platts, Esq. London: Wm. H. Allen and Co. 1869, vii

divinity shines in a being, the plainer is its servitude.³

And in a way which anticipates our whole reading, he says:

So again with all the rest of creation — angels, men, or jinn. None of these is vouchsafed all virtues together, or all of God's gifts at once. Each lacks something beyond what it has. Perfection belongs to God alone, *one and triumphant*.⁴

The roots of this attitude can be found in Neoplatonism and the emanation of perfection. But here the emphasis is instead on the scattering of perfections. The ideas of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā are often mentioned in defense of a kind of liberalism or a defense of animal rights.⁵ But this is not what interests me about the work. The group were living in an age faced suddenly with a new diversity of knowledge and they were trying to navigate their way through this diversity. They needed to consider both the perfections and the imperfections of various kinds of knowledge and religion.

The king of the Jinn recesses the trial at one point and assembles all the learned Jinn together to hear their council. Some Jinn side with the animals. But one Jinn sees a danger. If the king lets the animals free from their human masters, then everything will be blamed on the Jinn.⁶ He then recounts the history of the Jinn. He tells of how they once ruled the earth before man. But the earth fell into conflict so god sent angels to subdue the Jinn. Satan or Iblis was a Jinn who remained on earth and as raised among the angels learning their wisdom but ultimately using it for deceit. When Adam was created the angels recognized his superiority.

God inspired Adam with the names of the trees, fruits, plants, and animals in the garden. As soon as he could speak, he asked the angels about them, but they had no answer. So he sat down to teach them their names, benefits, and harms, and the angels followed his lead. For it was plain to them that he was their better.⁷

Notice in this passage that the superiority of the human being is the ability to recognize and name the diversity of creation. But Satan or Iblis was jealous and tricked Adam and Eve into eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Satan tells them:

‘God has uplifted you, gracing you with articulate speech and discernment. But if you ate of this tree, you would grow yet wiser and surer. You would

³ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā. *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*, 123.

⁴ Ibid, 124-125.

⁵ There are interesting articles which see these texts as condemning the marginalization of minority groups, or which struggle with the issue of animal rights. See for example Asghar Ali Engineer, “Ikhwan-us Safa: A Rational and Liberal Approach to Islam” and Katharine Loevy, “The Ikhwan al-Safa's Animal Accusers: An Islamic Debate on Animal Slavery,” *Environmental Philosophy* 16:2, Fall 2019, pp. 319-338.

⁶ The Jinn warns: “Don't you know that although the sons of Adam have gross, earthly bodies, they also have heavenly spirits and angel-like rational souls that set them above us? There are lessons to be learned, you know, from the histories of ancient times and all that passed between us and the humans in ages gone by!”, 131.

⁷ Ibid, 135.

live here forever, safe, deathless, eternal.’⁸

He promises them unlimited knowledge and supreme perfection. The human condition involves its fall from the garden as a result of this transgression. And the Jinn are now blamed for the corruption of the human beings.

As time went on, the Jinn began to follow the teachings of God’s prophets converting to Judaism, Christianity and ultimately Islam, and became righteous. They atoned for the trouble they caused through Satan by reforming, living among men teaching them arts and sciences.⁹ The Jinn, just like the angels in Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas, represent the intellect and its capacity for knowledge. The memory of past misdeeds is still present, so the Jinn need to consider the consequences if they rule in favor of the animals and release them from their servitude.

This suggest an ambiguity to all knowledge. On one hand it is a blessing, on the other, it can be abused. The danger is of unrestricted knowledge or un-tempered knowledge. This dangerous aspect of knowledge is brought up once more in the epistle. The human beings claim their superiority as a result of their knowledge, but the Parrot replies that knowledge often leads to error and unbelief.

He contrasts this to the innocence and purity of animals who praise God through their every action. The speech of the Parrot explains this.

‘You mentioned that you have poets, orators, theologians, and such. But if you could follow the discourse of the birds, the anthems of the swarming creatures, the hymns of the crawling creatures, the hosannas of the beasts, the meditative murmur of the cricket, entreaty of the frog, admonitions of the bulbul, homilies of the larks, the sand-grouse’s lauds and the cranes’ celebration, the cock’s call to worship, the poetry doves utter in their cooing and the soothsaying ravens in their croaking, what the swallows describe and the hoopoe reports, what the ant tells and the bee relates, what the flies portend and the owl cautions, and all the other animals with voice or buzz or roar, you would know, O human race, you would realize that among these throngs are orators and eloquent speakers, theologians, preachers, admonishers, and diviners, just as there are among the sons of Adam. So why do you brag of your orators, poets, and the like at our expense? ‘There’s ample argument and proof of what I say in God’s words in the Qur’an: *There is not a thing that does not praise and exalt Him, but you understand not their praises.* God calls you dim and benighted when he says *you understand not.* He connects us with insight, good sense, and awareness when He says, *Each*

⁸ Ibid, 135.

⁹ In a footnote, the translators point out this theme is found in the Qur’ran and the attraction that the story of Solomon and Sheba had for the prophet Mohammed, that is, “... the contrast of Sheba’s earthly (but highly portable) throne and the true and immovable might of God’s throne. Since the Ikhwān regard the jinn as natural forms and forces, their subjection to Solomon is emblematic of the Faustian position of *homo faber*, who may harness nature’s powers with God’s help but is lost without reliance on God’s aid.” (footnote 123, 140)

*knows His worship and praise.*¹⁰

The Cricket in providing an argument for animal diversity points to the distribution of perfections throughout the animal kingdom:

‘Certainly. When the Creator decreed the various types of creatures and parceled out his gifts He dealt justly with them, as His wisdom determined, allotting his gifts with scrupulous fairness, justice, and equity.’¹¹

So we can piece this together to understand that each animal possesses their own perfections and they act and praise God in accordance with their own perfection or nature.¹²

This innocence is restated again in the speech of the Nightingale. At one point the human beings claim superiority because of their unity of form while the animals are divided into a diversity of forms. But the Nightingale replies:

‘He is right, your Majesty, in what he says. But though our forms are many and diverse, our souls are one, whereas these humans, while one in form, have many and conflicting souls.’ Said the King, ‘How is that? Explain!’ ‘Their diverse notions, rival sects, competing schools, and varied religions. ‘Among them you find Jews, Christians, Sabians, Magians, pagans, idolaters, and worshippers of the sun and moon, stars and constellations, among other things. And you’ll find that the followers of a single faith also split into many sects and schools. There are Samaritans, Ananites, and Exilarchs, Nestorians, Jacobites, and Melkites, Dualists, Khurramites, Mazdakites, and Manichaeans, Brahmins, Buddhists, and Dīṣānites, Khārījites, Nāṣibites, Rāfiḏites, Murji’ites, Qadarites, Jahmites, Mu‘tazilites, Sunnis, Jabrites — among many other opinions and schools, all calling each other unbelievers, cursing and killing each other ‘But we are free of all such dissension. We have one outlook, one credo. We are all monotheists, faithful *Muslims*, who assign God’s divinity to no other and do not fall into hypocrisy and lawlessness. We have no doubts, confusions, or perplexities, no straying or misleading. We acknowledge our Lord, the Creator and Provider who gives us life and death and whom we praise, sanctify, celebrate, and exalt, morning and evening — although these humans do not comprehend our songs of praise.’¹³

In response to this, a human delegate argues for a kind of Perennial philosophy.

The Persian responded, ‘We do the same. We say our Lord is one, our Creator is one, our Provider is one, He who gives us life and death is one without peer.’ ‘Why, then,’ asked the King, ‘do you have different doctrines, sects, and creeds, if your Lord is one?’ ‘Because religions,

¹⁰ Ibid, 279.

¹¹ Ibid, 297.

¹² The King of the Bees states: “We praise Him when we rise at dawn and adore Him when we retire at evening with the prayers and salutations we have been taught, as He says, There is no thing that does not sing His praises, but you comprehend not their praise.” 242-243.

¹³ Ibid, 302-303.

schools, and sects are just different paths different avenues of approach. Our goal is one. Whichever path we take, *God's face is there*. 'So why do you slay one another, if the folk of all your religions have the same goal, of encounter with God?' 'You're right, your Majesty', said the thoughtful Persian. 'This does not come from faith, for there is *no compulsion in faith*. It comes from faith's specious counterpart, the state.'¹⁴

Notice that the animals claim superiority because of their innocence and the purity of devotion. The humans acknowledge religious difference but emphasize the ability to follow a certain path. There are similar ideas in St. Augustine and other writers. Freedom of will is given to human beings as a gift so that they can follow the path towards God, but it can also be used to turn from God. And often religion is used or abused by the state. This is why the image of the ideal leader is the one who combines both prophesy and leadership.

This is then demonstrated in the speech by the leader of the Bees whose name is Ya'sūb.

When the human delegate had finished speaking, the King scanned the motley throng of animals assembled before him and heard a whizzing, buzzing sound. It came from Ya'sūb, prince and leader of the bees, stock still in mid-air, moving his wings swiftly with a hum that sang like the highest note of tiny lute. He was praising, sanctifying, and celebrating God. 'Who are you?' asked the King. 'I am the delegate of the swarming creatures and their prince.' 'How is it that you came yourself and did not send one of your subjects or soldiery as an emissary, like the other animals?' 'It was because of my tender feelings of compassion and concern for them. I feared some harm, ill, or misfortune might befall one of them.' 'Why are you so sensitive compared to all the other animal kings?' 'Only because my Lord favoured me with gifts of His bounty, grace, and immense generosity, beyond my accounting.' 'Mention a few of those gifts, and explain, so that we may hear and understand.' 'I shall, your Majesty. Among God's special blessings on me and my fathers and grandfathers were his gifts of royal rule and prophecy, which He made our heritage, from our fathers and forefathers and our legacy to our offspring and posterity, to be passed down from generation to generation until the Day of Judgement — two splendid gifts that most creatures, jinni, animal, or human, are denied.'¹⁵

Notice that the speech of Ya'sūb gives us a clue to the meaning of the arrival at the end of the assembly of the a virtuous and devout man also known as the perfect man.

Finally arose a learned, accomplished, worthy, keen, pious, and insightful man. He was Persian by breeding, Arabian by faith, a *ḥanīf* by confession, Iraqi in culture, Hebrew in lore, Christian in manner, Damascene in devotion, Greek in science, Indian in discernment, Sufi in intimations, regal in character, masterful in thought, and divine in awareness. 'Praised be God, Lord of all worlds,' he said, 'Destiny of the faithful, and foe to none but the

¹⁴ Ibid, 303.

¹⁵ Ibid, 232.

unjust. God bless the Seal of Prophets, foremost of God's messengers, Muhammad, God's elect, and all his worthy house and good nation. 'Yes, just Majesty and assembled hosts', he began. 'These saints of God are the flower of creation, the best, the purest, persons of fair and praiseworthy parts, pious deeds, myriad sciences, godly awareness, regal character, just and holy lives, and awesome ways. Fluent tongues weary to name their qualities, and no one has adequately described their inmost core. Many have cited their virtues, and preachers in public assemblies have devoted their lives down through the ages to sermons dilating on their merits and their godly ways, without ever reaching the pith of the matter.'¹⁶

And this is where the Epistle ends. Although in some versions there is an addition explaining how the human beings maintain the rule over their animal subjects.¹⁷ The ending has always been considered to be rather abrupt. Control over the animals is awarded to the human beings. In many interpretations like that of Nasr, the reason given is that humans possess eternal life.

But who is the perfect man? Like the Ya'sūb the leader of the Bees it would be someone who possesses both royal rule and prophesy. The prophet is the only human being where those two perfections coexist. Godefroid de Callataÿ relates:

Usually, the tasks of the king are clearly distinguished from those of the prophet, because kingship is a mundane activity, whereas prophecy is related to the spiritual. However, sometimes these qualities are combined in a single person, who is then the delegated prophet and also the king. The fact that men in whom kingship and prophecy are united do not crave after worldly things is proof of God's tenderness towards His community. The Prophet Muhammad was both prophet and king of the Muslim *umma*, thus ensuring its best defense, but his successors did not always match him in nobility.¹⁸

Only the prophet is perfect while the rest of humanity is, in comparison, imperfect. In the prologue to Epistle twenty-two, it is stated:

Man at his best, we shall show, is a noble angel, the finest of creatures; but at his worst, an accursed devil, the bane of creation. We've put these themes into the mouths of animals, to make the case clearer and more compelling — more

¹⁶ Ibid, 313-315.

¹⁷ In footnote 566 the translators point out the revisions and addition made to the text by various editions. They write: "The modern printed editions of the Arabic text fill out the story here, as if to compensate for the seeming abruptness and surprising turn of the last few pages. The Ziriklī, Tāmīr, and Bustānī editions add the following: "And how did the just King rule on the claims of these human strangers, and their responses to the counter-claims of the animals? His order was that all of the animals were to be subject to the commands and prohibitions of the humans and remain subject to them until a new age had dawned. But then they would have a new fate. At this, one of the King's attendants rose and announced, 'You have heard, O animals, the explanations of these humans and you have conceded that their arguments are sound. You have acknowledged that you are satisfied. So retire and return under God's protection and safe conduct'" (315).

¹⁸ Godefroid de Callataÿ, "For Those With Eyes to See: On the Hidden Meaning of the Animal Fable in the Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2018, 22.

striking in the telling, wittier, livelier, more useful to the listener, and more poignant and thought-provoking in its moral.¹⁹

Each animal possessed a perfection which placed them in many ways as superior to human beings. But the animal innocently operates out of its own perfection. Human beings are imperfect or incomplete in contrast to the perfect animal. But it is only the 'imperfect' human who can recognize the perfections spread through the diversity of cultures and religions and strive towards these diverse perfections. And this, in my opinion, is why the Jinn finally side with the humans.²⁰

The French writer Dany-Robert Dufour in his book *The Art of Shrinking Heads* expresses this incompleteness of the human being well.

Kant put it very well: 'unlike the animals, man needs a reason of his own. Having no instinct, he has to work out a plan of conduct for himself'. In other words, the human being is what we would call a neotenin, and his nature is incomplete. His nature does not allow him to perfect himself, and he must therefore abandon it in order to realize himself. To the extent that he is an unfinished being, he is dependent upon another who can compensate for the human being's incompleteness. And, to the extent that he is forced to seek out that other being, the first domination to which the human being succumbs is of an ontological nature. We can put this in different terms: her nature is not enough to keep he alive, and she must at all cost encounter the whole of language and culture before she can be complete.²¹

The idea of the perfect man is really the complement to the imperfect human being. The human being who has the ability to use knowledge to traverse cultural and religious boundaries and recognize and strive for God's perfections as they are scattered over creation.

On the Diversity of Culture and Religion

We are witnessing an increasing tension across the globe. On one hand we are witnessing a universalist tendency which is gradually eroding cultural difference. This universalizing tendency is also replacing Culture with identity politics. In direct reaction to this, on the other hand, is the forced attempt to impose cultural and religious purity which often takes the form of nationalism. This reaction is deeply flawed because it does not recognize that culture is always enriched by its interaction with other cultures.

¹⁹ Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa' wa-Khillan al-Wafa', volume 20 of the Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 1999.65.

²⁰ This is also reflected in the symbolism of the Bee. Callatay writes concerning the speech of Ya'sub: "The whole passage is clearly to be regarded as a confirmation and endorsement of what the Qur'an says of bees in *Surat al-Nahl*, and which the Ikhwan do not omit to cite: 'And your Lord inspired to the bee, "Take for yourself among the mountains, houses, and among the trees and [in] that which they construct. Then eat from all the fruits and follow the ways of your Lord laid down [for you]"' (Q. 16.68-70) (20).

²¹ Dufour, Dany-Robert. *The Art of Shrinking Heads*. (D. Macey, Trans.) Cambridge: Polity Press. 2008, 155.

But certainly the stronger of these tendencies is leading human beings towards a future where they will be unified and organized by information.

There is a secular understanding of culture which informs this tendency and is encoded into the very systems of information and control. We can witness its exaggerated form in the Sociobiology of Edward O. Wilson. Wilson believes we have finally reached the dream of the early enlightenment thinkers which envisioned the unity of all knowledge. The term Wilson uses, which he borrowed from the French enlightenment thinker, Marquis de Condorcet, is 'consilience.' That is all human social behavior can be understood by reduction to deeper levels of scientific explanation, down to the level of physics and mathematics. This would mean that culture is ultimately reducible to genetics. Wilson describes it as follows:

Culture is created by the communal mind, and each mind in turn is the product of the genetically structured human brain. Genes and culture are therefore inseverably linked. But the linkage is flexible, to a degree still mostly unmeasured. The linkage is also tortuous: Genes prescribe epigenetic rules, which are the neural pathways and regularities in cognitive development by which the individual mind assembles itself. The mind grows from birth to death by absorbing parts of the existing culture available to it, with selections guided through epigenetic rules inherited by the individual brain.²²

Likewise, religious belief and even art would be merely reduced to its function and value in human natural selection. This is a tendency in what is sometimes called secular fundamentalism, the belief that everything is reducible to material processes. Its tendency is controversial and important, because we will be living in a future increasingly run by machines. This functional understanding of culture and religion is the one most easily programmable into our computers and AI systems. This (mis)interpretation of the world is gradually deepened and made 'real.'

But you see, this tendency toward extreme materialism, reduction and abstraction would ultimately lead to the destruction of cultural memory, of diversity, of spiritual values. But we need to consider that once we lose these things, that we will be in danger of losing our humanity and have no way to navigate, to become conscious of our place in the world. We will have no way to regard the dignity of the individual.

The writer Wendell Berry in his book *Life is a Miracle*, takes Wilson to task over this reduction of all knowledge into a single system. But he also addresses this very problem of scientific reduction and abstraction to be sensitive to the dignity of the human being. In such thinking, all living things including the individual human being is abstracted to a kind of genetic type.

The abstractions of science are too readily assimilable to the abstractions of industry and commerce, which see everything as interchangeable with or replaceable by something else... Directly opposed to this reduction or abstraction of things is the idea of the preciousness of individual lives and

²² Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, 138.

places. This does not come from science, but from our cultural and religious traditions.²³

In the Epistle on animals in the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, we saw that human beings were different from the animals because of human imperfection. Because humans can overcome their imperfection by struggling to recognize the diversity of perfections spread through nature, and the various cultures and religions.

Such thinkers like Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler also touch upon a similar theme. Their discussions are centered around the idea of “stupidity.” For instance, Deleuze – drawing from Schelling and Gilbert Simondon – in his work *Difference and Repetition* wishes to see “stupidity as a specifically human form of bestiality.”²⁴ Stupidity is related to the ground of thinking or preindividual fields; that is, our particular territories, our cultures and religions. These preindividual fields make thinking possible but they also lead us to “stupidity” because of the limitations of those specific grounds in relation to a larger ground (whether it be the abyss or the immanence of nature, or what we are here calling God). For Deleuze it also allows for the possibility to transcend the limits and the dogmatism of our preindividual fields. This is in some ways similar to the terrain we are travelling in this essay. But the problem in the *emphasis* of Deleuze's approach. Following Nietzsche, he is engaged in a project for the overcoming of contemporary Nihilism. And he tends to see this overcoming (which he calls deterritorialization) as a kind of emancipation from our preindividual fields or traditions (which he calls reterritorialization). But here in this paper, when we speak about the imperfections of human beings, we are speaking of something we must strive to surmount by our ability to recognize the perfections spread throughout our traditions and territories. These are perfections which Deleuze and the others cannot recognize.²⁵

The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā recognize that the various sciences possess perfections, yet this is not enough. There is also a transcendental dimension. Our religions and sciences possess their respective perfections in a manner where they maintain their independence and do not disappear into one another. This is because they exist against the background of an unfathomable mystery which cannot be completely exhausted by particular scientific or religious understandings. Plato, Pythagoras, Jesus, Moses and Mohammed are often mentioned together. They all recognize a kind of spiritual transcendence and theophany. They call this “spiritual paternity.”

It is related of the prophet that he said to ‘Alyy: “I and you are the fathers of this nation.” Christ said in the same sense to the apostles: “I have come from my father and your father,” and it is said in the Qoran, “the religion of your father Abraham.” All these are allusions to spiritual paternity.²⁶

²³ Berry, Wendell, *Life is a Miracle*, 41-42.

²⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 150. Jacques Derrida questions this distinction in his work *The Beast and the Sovereign*.

²⁵ One can also see this positive conception of imperfection in al-Farabi who was a contemporary of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā. In his reflections on the perfect or virtuous city, which he takes from his reading of Plato's *Republic*, he contrasts the virtuous city to the lesser imperfect cities. Among the imperfect cities, a democracy is the best, because it provides with the highest degree of intellectual freedom and possibility.

²⁶ *Rasa'il Ikhwan as-Safa' wa-Khillan al-Wafa'*, volume 20, 214.

While the idea of spiritual paternity is clearly outdated today. The deeper meaning still holds. That is, we cannot completely understand things from a purely earthly or materialistic perspective. Our human knowledge is limited in relation to a higher (or deeper) mystery. This mystery finds its unity only in what can be called God.

Knowledge (The Gift of the Divs)

This recognition, that we cannot achieve what Wilson would call consilience, is what drives the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā to collect from the pool of all knowledge, while respecting diversity of their various truths or perfections.

The diversity of cultures sciences and religions can be seen as reinforcing one another. This allows us to recognize a “creed which goes beyond all creeds,” and to see beyond the surface phenomena of the world. And in a famous quotation from Epistle four they express their aim:

[To] shun no science, scorn any book, or to cling fanatically to no single creed. For [their] own creed encompasses all the others and comprehends all the sciences generally. This creed is the consideration of all existing things, both sensible and intelligible, from beginning to end, whether hidden or overt, manifest or obscure . . . in so far as they all derive from a single principle, a single cause, a single world, and a single Soul.²⁷

So you can see how important this is for us. In scientific materialism we are considered as mere expressions of some genetic code which can be manipulated. In secular fundamentalism we are merely isolated individuals connected by economic systems. In religious fundamentalism we are merely disciples whose cultural memory has been destroyed.

In all these cases, the transcendent spiritual element is extinguished and we become mere creatures of information and politics. What is needed is the ability to navigate the contemporary diverse world of information, media images and technologies, to always recognize the ‘spiritual meanings’ or the deeper significance of what stands before us.

²⁷ This quotation is from: Ikhwan al-Safa’. *Rasa’il Ikhwan al-Safa’* (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity), 52.



“Tahmuras defeats the Divs” by Sultan Muhammad.²⁸

Here we can return to the ambiguous role of the Jinn. In Persian literature the Jinn are sometimes known as Divs. They have the added dimension of representing not only knowledge but also the older gods and divinities of the surrounding cultures. In the Shahnameh, when Tahmuras defeats the Divs, they teach the arts of writing and other arts. That is, the Other culture possesses treasures of knowledge that one must learn from.

Tahmuras Defeats The Divs

²⁸ The Metropolitan Museum caption describes it as follows: “The fight against the obscure forces of evil, here personified by a horde of multicolored *divs* (demons), was among the most challenging tasks of the early kings of Iran. Tahmuras, who became known as the “*div*-binder,” was the ruler who succeeded in subduing them. In order to have their lives spared, the *divs* promised to teach man the precious art of writing. This is how humankind learned various alphabets, including Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Persian, and Sogdian.” (Metropolitan Museum of Art) (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1970.301.3>).

The captives bound and stricken begged their lives.
“Destroy us not,” they said, “and we will teach thee
A new and fruitful art.”
He gave them quarter
To learn their secret. When they were released
They had to serve him, lit his mind with knowledge
And taught him how to write some thirty scripts
Such as the Ruman, Persian, Arabic,
Sughdi, Chini, and Pahlavi, and thus
Delineate sounds. How many better arts
Explored he in a reign of thirty years,
Yet passed away! His time of life was spent
And all his toils became his monument.²⁹

Tahmuras does not destroy the Divs but learns from them. Persian civilization was enriched by introduction of outside knowledge and the introduction of the Arabic script. The Divs, just like the Jinn *turn* to the aid of humanity. Likewise, the diversity of knowledge, religions, the innovations of each culture need to be *turned* toward the aid of humanity. The political approaches that create so much turmoil in the present are based upon the idea of the ‘clash of civilizations’ which is often used to justify the destruction of what is considered an inferior civilization. But we need to recognize the perfections of what is our own and the perfections of what comes from the outside (even if it comes from one's 'enemy'). The two are in an uneasy balance and interaction.

The French writer, Victor Segalen, once spoke of the age of globalization based upon his travels in China over 100 years ago.

We should have faith that some fundamental differences will never end up being a real fabric without some sewing or restitching of fragments; and that the increasing fusion, the destruction of barriers, the great short cuts through space, must of their own accord compensate themselves by means of new partitions and unforeseen lacuna.³⁰

He recognized that cultural difference is necessary. The gaps between cultures – what he calls “exoticism” or the “aesthetics of diversity” – is what allows thinking to take place.

As someone who has personally lived among many cultures, I suspect that I have been conditioned by my experiences and tend to be drawn to thinkers like Segalen or inspired by the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā. My own position emerges in a sense from the tensions between positions and traditions. I often find myself at odds with the unqualified support for universalism which I see among many friends and scholars. Or the Poststructuralist and Postmodern approaches which are suspicious of cultural and religious ‘determination.’ But what would it mean philosophically to defend cultural

²⁹ The *Shahnama* of Firdausi, Arthur George Warner, Edmond Warner (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co) 1909, 127.

³⁰ Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism*, 57.

diversity? I don't mean the mere simple respect for the Other, but something deeper – the defense of a *need* for cultural diversity? I would like to suggest that through culture and history human beings both adapt to, and transcend nature. The diversity of cultures emerges from the way communities interact with their particular landscapes. And yet our particular landscapes and experiences are limited in relationship to any ultimate perfection or truth. It is within the limited sphere of place and time that a perfection or excellence can be developed. It is, in a way, a victory over the movement of time. So this diversity of the landscapes and arenas for human thought and action allow for the emergence of human cultural and religious perfections or excellences.

There is a fundamental flaw or imperfection to the human being which distinguishes them from animals. It takes the form of gaps across which thinking, creativity and innovation takes place. These take root in the form of culture and religion. The great danger is not only the erosion of this diversity spread across the globe, but also that we rationalize this as something desirable. The information systems which increasingly organize society are gradually eliminating the underlying cultural diversity which characterizes human history, a diversity responsible for much strife but also responsible for the creation of beauty and innovation. Crude forms of universalism and identity politics cannot replace cultural difference. Without diversity, thinking ceases.

And where does this leave us? The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā often wrote about friendship and they would meet together as a secret debating society. You can understand the Epistle on animals as being a kind of a fable or *Panchatantra* reflecting what they themselves were engaged in. That is, the conflicts of knowledge and religion, the gathering of diverse arguments. We are engaged in this today in our conferences and academic papers. In our academic communities and conferences, we often take on the role of a Jinn or a Div. We often stand outside of the other's belief system in such a way that presents a challenge. We at times offer direct insights, but at other times, offer momentary disruptions of thought which can lead us individually to deeper reflection. But above all, we hope what we offer can be accepted as a gift, something which loosely unites us through bonds of friendship into our own community.

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