



## Research Paper

## The Problem of the Other and the Ethics of Interaction with the Surrounding Nature from the Perspective of Muslim Philosophers (With a Focus on the Views of Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā)

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### Abstract

In contemporary modes of life characterized by excessive self-centeredness the problem of the Other has emerged as a significant challenge. Meanwhile, Islamic philosophical foundations contain insights that can offer guidance in this regard. The present study investigates how, from the viewpoint of Islamic philosophers (with an emphasis on the thought of Ibn Sīnā and Mullā Ṣadrā), the problem of the Other is conceptualized and what its essential components are. It also examines, based on these extracted components, what ethical approaches can be proposed for interacting with the surrounding natural world—the “non-human Other.” Through an examination of the works of these philosophers, three essential components of the problem of the Other from the standpoint of major Islamic thinkers can be identified: 1- The unavoidable intertwining of individual and social felicity with the problem of the Other; 2- The concomitance of existence and cognition, and the expansion of the referents of the “cognizant Other”; 3- The articulation of the problem of the Other within a theological worldview grounded in a purposive, God-centered (rather than self-centered) cosmos. Building upon these components, several ethical approaches to human interaction with the surrounding environment rooted in the philosophical perspective on the problem of the Other are derived. These include: a) The manifestation of individual and social felicity through constructive engagement with the natural environment; b) An environmental ethic founded on expanding the scope of the “cognizant Other”; c) The moral inadmissibility of unrestrained exploitation and the necessity of distributive justice in sharing natural resources and benefits.

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## Extended Abstract

### 1. Problem

The present article examines the Problem of the Other from the perspective of Muslim philosophers (focusing on Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā) and subsequently extracts its ethical implications for interaction with the surrounding nature. The author, pointing to the crisis of excessive self-centeredness in the modern era and the emergence of lifestyles based on unbounded humanism, argues that the Problem of the Other" constitutes one of the fundamental philosophical and ethical challenges of the contemporary age. While Western philosophers have predominantly addressed this issue through a phenomenological approach (e.g., Hegel, Husserl, Sartre, Levinas, and Ricœur), the Islamic philosophical tradition—due to its ontological orientation—has less directly engaged with "the Problem of the Other.

The main research question is twofold:

1. What are the fundamental ontological components of the Problem of the Other from the perspective of Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā?

2. Based on these components, what ethical approaches to interaction with surrounding nature (the non-human Other, including animals, plants, and inanimate beings) can be derived?

The article's novelty lies in two aspects: first, its focus on the Problem of the Other as a framework for analyzing environmental ethics—an approach rarely seen in previous works; second, its simultaneous attention to both Avicenna (as the greatest Peripatetic philosopher) and Mullā Ṣadrā (as the founder of Transcendent Philosophy) and the synthesis of their views to articulate the perspective of Muslim philosophers.

### 2. Methodology

This research employs a descriptive-analytical method. Data collection was conducted through library research with critical reading of the primary works of Avicenna (such as *Al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*, *Al-Najāt*, *Rasā'il*, *Al-Shifā': Ilāhiyyāt*, and *Dānishnāma-yi 'Alā'ī*) and Mullā Ṣadrā (such as *Al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah fī al-Asfār al-'Aqliyyah al-Arba'ah*, *Al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ād*, *Al-Shawāhid al-Rubūbiyyah*, and *Kasr al-Aṣnām al-Jāhiliyyah*). Works of contemporary commentators and interpreters of Islamic philosophy (particularly Ayatollah Javadi Amoli) were also utilized for conceptualizing the Other within an Islamic framework.

In the first phase of the research, the ontological components of the Problem of the Other were inductively extracted from the works of these two philosophers. In the second phase, through analysis of the logical implications and consequences of these components, ethical approaches to interaction with surrounding nature were derived. The author emphasizes that the goal is not merely a review of philosophical foundations but practical application—demonstrating the trajectory from general principles to more specific implications. The article also employs conceptual modeling (a diagram illustrating the relationship between intensity of existence and level of perception) to facilitate understanding of the foundational principles.

### 3. Main Findings

The findings are presented in the form of three ontological components and three ethical approaches.

Ontological Components of the Problem of the Other:

**First:** The Inevitable Intertwining of Individual and Social Felicity with the



Problem of the Other: From the perspective of Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā, true felicity (sa'ādah) is not confined to individual introspection and asceticism. Avicenna understands felicity as the activity of theoretical and practical reason, and he himself was actively engaged in politics, medicine, and public service. Mullā Ṣadrā likewise structures his magnum opus, *Al-Asfār al-Arba'ah*, upon the foundation of the journey from creation to the Truth followed by "return to creation." His authorship of works such as *Kasr al-Aṣnām al-Jāhiliyyah* demonstrates his reformist efforts. Thus, the Other constitutes an essential pillar of felicity, and social reform along with attention to others are necessary conditions for individual perfection.

**Second:** The Co-extensiveness of Existence and Perception and the Expansion of the Instances of the Perceptive Other: Based on Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophical innovations, existence and perception are co-extensive (*tasāwuq al-wujūd wa al-idrāk*). The principle of gradation of existence (*tashkīk al-wujūd*) explains the different levels of existential intensity. The article presents a conceptual model according to which the greater the existential intensity of a being, the higher its level of perception and consciousness. The conclusion is that perception is not exclusive to humans; rather, all components of nature (animals, plants, and inanimate beings) possess degrees of consciousness. Avicenna, through his theory of vegetative, animal, and human souls, also provides a basis for accepting hierarchical levels of perception.

**Third:** The Problem of the Other within a God-Centered (Rather than Self-Centered) Teleological Worldview: In Islamic philosophy, the axis of existence is God, and the world is created purposefully and teleologically. Humans are God's

vicegerent (*khalīfah*), but this status does not imply self-centered humanism; rather, the human being who follows the divine path bears responsibility toward others (both human and non-human). No part of nature has been created in vain, and all play a role in the hierarchical order of creation's purpose.

Ethical Approaches to Interaction with Surrounding Nature:

**First:** The Manifestation of Individual and Social Felicity in Constructive Interaction with Nature: Humans bear responsibility toward nature. This responsibility has two dimensions: an individual dimension (good deeds such as planting trees, which carry otherworldly rewards, as emphasized in the prophetic traditions) and a social dimension (environmental preservation due to its collective effects). Avicenna, in his theory of divine providence (*ināyah*), guarantees a network of goods (*k hayrāt*) for all substances, which includes the good of animals. Mullā Ṣadrā and his followers, based on the faculty of imagination (*khayāl*) in animals, posit the possibility of an intermediate state (*barzakh*) and afterlife for certain animals.

**Second:** The Necessity of Positive Interaction with Nature Based on Expanding the Instances of the Perceptive Other: If all components of nature possess consciousness, they cannot be treated with indifference. The article emphasizes that a distinction must be made between perceptual superiority and moral superiority: although humans are perceptually superior, this perceptual superiority does not necessarily entail moral superiority (i.e., disregarding the suffering of other beings). If perceptual superiority were the criterion for moral superiority, then in human society, more educated individuals would have the right to disregard the suffering of less



educated individuals—a clearly absurd conclusion.

**Third:** The Reprehensibility of Unlimited Exploitation and the Necessity of Distributive Justice in Allocating Natural Resources: Within a God-centered worldview, human utilization of nature is conditional upon observing religious boundaries and the purpose of creation. The human-nature relationship is one of subjugation (*taskhīr*)—an action consonant with the agent's nature, grounded in wisdom—rather than violent coercion (*qahr wa qasr*). The rights of the various components of nature must be respected, although this does not imply complete equality between humans and animals.

#### 4. Discussion

In the discussion section, the author addresses several key points. **First**, the Problem of the Other in Islamic philosophy is not a peripheral issue but is rather situated within theoretical and practical monotheism (*tawḥīd*) and can serve as a foundation for theorizing in emerging fields such as environmental ethics.

**Second**, the article distinguishes between two interpretations of human superiority: perceptual superiority (which Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā affirm) and moral superiority (which does not necessarily follow from perceptual superiority). This distinction represents one of the article's most significant analytical achievements, as it preserves the special status of humans in the cosmos while preventing them from falling into excessive moral exceptionalism.

**Third**, drawing on religious sources (the Qur'an, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, and traditions of the Prophet and Imams), the article demonstrates that Islamic teachings are not only compatible with environmental ethics but actively affirm and

emphasize it. For example, a tradition from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) equating the cutting down of trees in wartime with the killing of innocent children, as well as the teachings of Imam 'Alī (AS) regarding feeding animals and not separating offspring from their mothers, exemplify such emphases.

**Fourth**, the article presents a model of the gradational nature of ethical commitment (*dhū marātib*): adherence to the ethical principles of interaction with nature is a function of the levels of monotheism and faith. Essential monotheism (*tawḥīd dhātī*), attributive monotheism (*tawḥīd šifātī*), affective monotheism (*tawḥīd af'ālī*), and practical monotheism (*tawḥīd 'amalī*) have different degrees, and depending on one's level of faith, one realizes varying degrees of responsibility toward nature.

The author concludes the discussion by emphasizing that the article does not advocate for excessive other-directedness but rather critiques excessive self-centeredness and delineates a balanced ethical life in relation to all others. The article also explicitly states that respecting the rights of nature does not imply complete equality between human and animal rights; certain forms of superiority (e.g., perceptual superiority) remain reserved for humans.

#### 5. Conclusion

The article concludes by summarizing the findings: Islamic philosophy (focusing on Avicenna and Mullā Ṣadrā) offers a rich and systematic framework for understanding the Problem of the Other, which can be encapsulated in three key components: (1) the inevitable intertwining of individual and social felicity with the Other; (2) the co-extensiveness of existence and perception and the expansion of instances of



the perceptive Other; and (3) a God-centered, teleological worldview.

These components, in turn, yield specific ethical approaches to interaction with surrounding nature: (1) individual and social felicity is manifested in constructive interaction with nature; (2) given the consciousness of nature, positive interaction with it as a perceptive Other is necessary; and (3) unlimited exploitation of nature is reprehensible, and distributive justice in allocating natural resources between humans and other beings is essential.

The author emphasizes that contrary to common assumptions, Islamic philosophy is not alienated from the non-human Other; rather, through its robust

ontological principles, it can address contemporary ethical challenges such as the environmental crisis. Furthermore, by distinguishing between perceptual superiority and moral superiority, the article avoids falling into either excessive anthropocentrism or excessive other-directedness.

Finally, the article recommends that future research focus on comparative studies between Western phenomenological approaches and Islamic ontological approaches to the Problem of the Other, as well as the application of these components to emerging ethical issues such as animal rights, bioethics, and global environmental problems.