

The Book of Guidance to the Philosophy of Locusts

My dear unknown friend, Ismā‘īl ibn Zayd—may God preserve you and multiply your likes,

Warm greetings reach you wherever you may be, for I do not know where you are, just as I do not know who you are.

To proceed: I read your letter in *al-Risāla* a few days ago, and I have no idea where our friend Dr. ‘Awaḍ came upon it, for I had not received it before its publication. Had it reached me, I would not have delayed replying to you, despite the abundance of work and the mind’s preoccupation with matters which people regard as grave and far-reaching in the lives of individuals and communities—matters which, like you, I consider less serious and less dangerous than frog-hunting, the education of locusts, or extracting the rays of the sun from a cucumber peel.

I strongly suspect that you are a compassionate man where your friends are concerned, tender-hearted toward your companions. It occurred to you to consult me about the problem that presented itself to you, so you wrote your letter and were on the point of sending it to me. Then you remembered that I am overworked and exhausted, and you took pity on me, showed me kindness, and postponed sending your letter until the year should end and I might have leisure for such lofty and weighty topics.

But your letter fell into the hands of our friend ‘Awaḍ—by whatever one of the many mysterious paths through which books come to people, or people fall upon books. And ‘Awaḍ is a man gifted with the craftiness of goblins and the nimbleness of devils, gifts he has acquired, I imagine, from translating *Faust* and from his long familiarity with the devil of that great German poet. No sooner had the letter fallen into his hands—or no sooner had he fallen upon it—than he hurried it off to *al-Risāla*, laying a trap by publishing it, for you and for me alike.

He lays a trap for you because he imagines that people will laugh when they see these curious themes you think about and on which you expend your time and effort in study. And he lays a trap for me when, in your name, he publicly calls on me in front of all *al-Risāla*’s readers to arrange and classify these books of yours that you wish to publish on these topics.

‘Awaḍ is no demon, no afreet, no mere translator of *Faust* and long-time companion of Mephistopheles whose day and night pass without contriving and struggling to provoke someone and play a trick on some friend. And I suspect that if he fails to find a victim to annoy or tease, he will not hesitate to annoy himself or make himself the object of his own mischief. He has in al-Ḥuṭay’a a bad model and an ugly example. And it is inevitable that this world contain someone who invites people to evil and drives them to injustice, just as it contains those who invite people to good and guide them to righteousness and sound judgment.

I had first thought, my dear unknown friend, of ignoring this letter that never reached me, or of postponing my reply to it just as you postponed sending it. But—to tell you the truth—I had scarcely finished reading it when I found myself comforted by it and delighted with it, for it answered to an inclination in my soul and harmonized with some of the thoughts and

opinions that had been stirring in my head. So I could not but reply to you in *al-Risāla*: I do not know your address, I read your letter in *al-Risāla* and received it through that journal, and I do not trust that goblin—whom we call ‘Awaḍ and to whom we entrust the teaching of geography in two faculties of the university—not to subject your letter to a little editing and alteration. You know how difficult it would be for me to grant your request in a single article and classify those four books you have written without classification. That would require a stretch of time and leisure which I do not possess these days; and beyond that, it would require space in *al-Risāla* which she may not be able to devote to us without doing injustice to one or two of her literary contributors. I shall not even mention consideration for the reader, or concern for his comfort and amusement. The reader is the last person I think about. It does not concern me whether he is angered or pleased, whether he reads or turns away from reading, for I am not writing for him—I am writing for you. And I am not writing for him because this subject is deeper and subtler than to be written for readers. What is written for readers is Plato’s philosophy, or that of Aristotle or Nietzsche or their likes among the mighty minds. As for the philosophy of locusts, it is gentler, more delicate, more elusive than anything the minds of the educated can attain or the insight of the enlightened can penetrate. For that reason, I think of you, and not of the readers; and had I thought of them, I would have written nothing at all, for I do not wish to confront them with what they dislike.

There is therefore no way to discuss with you all four of the subjects on which you have written unclassified books. I shall instead talk with you about one of them only, chosen as a model for the others you have written and for those that might yet be written. If, however, you insist that I classify these four books for you, we might manage that in private meetings which we could arrange from time to time for this noble undertaking—meetings in which we could speak at leisure and in freedom, without the participation of those readers who might let themselves loose upon us, wag their tongues at us, and suspect us of God knows what.

I have chosen “Teaching Locusts the Principles of Philosophy” as the subject of this conversation. The first thing I must observe, my dear unknown friend, is that you have neglected the title of the book you composed with extreme negligence, and I strongly suspect that your neglect of the title is precisely what has prevented you from classifying the book as you wish.

I do not know whether the ancients were right when they said that a book is known by its title, but I am convinced that the title is what gives the book its classification and structure, reconciles its parts, and spreads through it that music which endears it to souls and tempts the minds of readers. The first care owed to the title, in my view, is that we follow in it the path of the pious ancients: do not cast it forth loosely, but bind it by rhyme and cadence. To leave things loose, without constraint, is to let them wander wherever they please and stream off in all directions—like these locusts which settle on the ear of wheat or the maize cob only long enough to spring away to another ear or another cob.

So when you want to write a book, my friend, do not think about its subject, or its parts, or its chapters and sections, or its aims and purposes. All that will come by itself, unbidden, without your calling it or importuning it with special care or reflection. The thing on which you must concentrate your effort, spend your time, and exhaust your strength is the title—the carefully constrained, artfully rhymed title.

The evidence lies in our great literary heritage: if you examine it, you will find that most of it has been bound with such rhymed titles. Another witness is our friend al-Zayyāt: he and I had

rich, fruitful contests in our youth in this rare art which only the few truly master. And another is our friend Maḥmūd Ḥasan Zanātī, who was our teacher in this marvellous craft.

Thus, no sooner had I chosen this topic for our conversation than I began, before anything else, to think about the title of the book you wrote and of which you have given me only the briefest hint. I have therefore called it *The Book of Guidance to the Philosophy of Locusts*.

Now, a truly brilliant title has this special virtue: the ordinary reader sees it and finds it clear and obvious; but the specialist, when he looks closer, discovers in it shades of obscurity and forms of strangeness which call for explanation and commentary, footnotes and glosses. There is no doubt that the educated readers of *al-Risāla* will find this title easy, smooth on the tongue, familiar and accessible. But the masters of expression and those firmly grounded in the science of interpretation will at once notice that the word “philosophy” here is being used not in its known, literal sense. Locusts, of course, have no philosophy—your wish to teach them philosophy proves as much. It might therefore be said that the word is being used as a rhetorical figure: the author intends “the philosophy of locusts” in view of what is yet to be—for, once they have read your book, the locusts, God willing, will be disciplined and refined and come to possess a philosophy.

But that is not what the author intends. He might instead mean something else: that locusts already possess a “locustine” philosophy which is now to be exchanged for a human philosophy. Or again, he might be using “philosophy” as a verbal noun—meaning the act of making locusts into philosophers. You say “I philosophized the thing,” meaning “I endowed it with philosophy”; “I philosophized a man,” meaning “I made of him a philosopher”; “I philosophized the locusts,” meaning “I made them philosophical.” You will not find this usage, of course, in the old Arabic dictionaries, so do not look for it there. Seek it instead in the writings of the philosophers of the Faculty of Arts. They are the ones who reconcile old and new, and to them we must turn in such perplexing matters.

You see how a single word in the title has already stirred up all these lines of inquiry, which I have merely alluded to in passing. What then of the title’s other words, taken separately or together? One thing is certain: this title will guarantee you two benefits. The first is that it will serve as an advertisement that will delight readers and please them—indeed, astonish and overwhelm them—and lead them to buy the book and recommend it to their friends and companions. It may even find favour in the Ministry of Education—and you know well what countless advantages might lie beyond that.

The second benefit is that this title will draw up the book’s program for you and allow you to classify it with no great difficulty. Do not trouble yourself with long deliberation and profound thought; simply take the words of the title and make each into the heading of one of your inquiries. You will see that your book has been classified, by God’s permission.

Let the first chapter, then, be devoted to the word *kitāb*—“book”: from what root it is derived, from where it comes, and the various meanings it has borne in different ages and different cultural environments. Do not be afraid that people will say you are digressing, prolix, and over-elaborate. Without digression, prolixity, and over-elaboration, most of knowledge—and at least most of literature—would vanish. You have in al-Jāḥiẓ, after all, an excellent example: he expanded at great length on the word *ḥayawān* (“animal”) at the beginning of his *Book of Animals*.

Aristotle had treated the same subject before him, but chose brevity and avoided digression; the result is that everyone reads al-Jāhiz, while hardly anyone looks into Aristotle's book. Aristotle's work is pure science, and scientific zoology has changed. Al-Jāhiz's work is literature, and literature rarely changes—especially when it is distinguished by length and generous digression. In the Faculty of Arts, we do not begin our lectures on literature before teaching the students at length about the word *adab* and its meanings. So follow our example; no harm will come to you from it.

Once you have completed these valuable inquiries—which, needless to say, have nothing to do, and must have nothing to do, with your actual subject—you may move to a second inquiry which will serve as a bridge between them and the subject: that is, the addition of *kitāb* to *al-irshād*—“book of guidance”—and the connection between “book” and “locusts.” How do books differ according to the categories of people they address, and how do they differ according to the kinds of animals they address? Not only in content and style, but also in size and format, in the material on which they are printed and published, and in the script and letters used in printing. For types of printing vary according to the reader's capacities and tastes, and the same holds true for sizes, paper, and bindings. This gradation must also apply to animals—and to locusts in particular. It is obvious that such an inquiry will lead you into many charming kinds of research in which no one has preceded you. If you illustrate your opinions with drawings, you may be sure that you will provoke a great event in the world of authorship, and that you will open for the Committee for Translation, Authorship, and Publication doors which it will not hesitate to enter—though it will have no idea how to get back out again.

Then leave this chapter for the second, whose title will be the second word: *al-irshād*—“guidance.” Proceed there as you did in the first: subject *irshād* and its meanings to the same kind of experiments to which you have subjected *kitāb*. Then discuss how one goes about “guiding” locusts: devote one section to the opinion of those who believe locusts understand with their minds, and explain how they might be guided on that basis; and another section to the view of modern scholars who believe locusts understand by their mouths and stomachs, explaining how one might guide them through these organs. As you know, people differ on this question. Some think the principles of philosophy should be written on the leaves, shoots, and plants that locusts fancy and love to eat; they say that when locusts feed on these philosophized leaves, they will comprehend knowledge, retain wisdom, and become philosophers by God's leave.

Then take the third word, *ilā*—“to”—as the title of the third chapter. You must investigate why “guidance” in Arabic is construed with *ilā* and not with any other preposition. Why do we say *kitāb al-irshād ilā falsafat al-jarād* (“Book of Guidance to the Philosophy of Locusts”), and not *li-falsafat* (“for”), *bi-falsafat* (“by”), *fī falsafat* (“in”), *min falsafat* (“from”), *‘an falsafat* (“about”), or *‘alā falsafat al-jarād* (“on the philosophy of locusts”)? It is obvious that each of these prepositions will require a very long section of its own. In Ibn Hishām's *Mughnī al-Labīb* you will find what will help you elaborate these sections. Do not fear this prolixity either: it will be what benefits you and makes your book popular with our Azharite friends.

Then, if you wish your book to find favour with the university public, and with the Faculty of Arts in particular, take the greatest care with the fourth chapter, on *philosophy*—for this is the book's true kernel; what came before are but shells, though shells without which no kernel can exist. Now you must discuss philosophy itself and the origin of the term. Beware of

saying it is Greek in origin. That may well be true, but these days truth is no match for innovation. Innovation today lies in uprooting things from their origins, putting them where they do not belong, and attributing them to alien sources. It seems likely that the word *falsafa* has a Semitic, and indeed an Arabic, origin. I have no doubt that you will find in the verse of some poet of Qudā‘a a line that proves to your satisfaction—and to that of everyone else—that the Arabs knew philosophy and used the term long before Socrates was born.

You must then set out the meanings of philosophy and the doctrines of philosophers in different ages and environments, and consider which of these philosophies is best suited to locusts—their minds, if you are among the partisans of the mind; or their stomachs, if you are among the partisans of the belly.

When you have navigated this immense and terrifying chapter, you will at last reach the final one—the result of all results, the jewel of jewels, the foundation of foundations, the decisive chapter and the essence of the entire work: the chapter on *locusts*, to whom the guidance is addressed.

Now this chapter is complex by nature. You must investigate the word *jarād*—whence it comes and whither it has gone. You must examine the place of locusts among other animals, their merits and defects. Then you must inquire into their “intelligence,” the faculties that compose it, and into their stomachs, and the particular virtues they may possess in receiving, digesting, and distributing knowledge and philosophy to the various parts and limbs of the body—until, at last, the locusts live their lives in a soundly philosophical manner.

Once you have arrived at this point in your book, and you imagine that you have brought it to its proper end and made a real contribution to knowledge that might merit a doctorate from the Faculty of Arts—then return to Descartes’ method. Wipe out everything you have written; assume that you have written nothing and know nothing, and begin again from the beginning. You will then see that you have wasted your time to no purpose, spent your effort to no avail, and consumed your rest, your paper, your ink, and your pens for nothing—because locusts have no need to learn human philosophy now. They learned it long ago. If they are plunderers, raiders, warriors, they learned this from man. For what is man but an animal whose very existence is organized around plunder, pillage, and war?

If they are light, swift, never still, always restless, they learned that from man as well. And I hardly think you could meet a single locust that does not know the old poet’s line:

“Taste the fragments of desire in wandering from place to place.”

If the locusts are so accomplished in lightness and movement, it is because they have taken this art from man. They watch “civilization” and its evolution, they watch “principles” and their ever-changing colours, they watch the confusion of people in their opinions, passions, doctrines, and “principles”; they watch consciences being sold, minds being enslaved, freedoms being despised, and “principles” turned into merchandise and a means to profit and base advantage.

The locusts have sometimes thought to imitate man in all this, but some remnant of their reason—or perhaps of their stomach, the true seat of philosophy—has kept them from sinking into that vile and pestilent pit into which modern man has fallen. So they remain as they are: noble raiders, coming to feed on such fruits of the earth as they can reach, and leaving nobly

if they can; or dying nobly under whatever scourges and exterminations man unleashes against them.

When you reach this conclusion, you stand between two choices. If you are among the partisans of corruption and lovers of degeneracy, who believe that man in our age has reached the highest stage of “civilization,” then resume your work to seek ways of guiding the locusts to imitate man in his downward plunge into that pit. But if you are among the conservatives who detest modern “evolution” and abhor its results, then invite man to learn the philosophy of locusts. Compose a book on that subject entitled *Clarification Concerning the Stripping Down of Man—al-tajarrud* here, of course, being derived from *jarād* (“locust”).

Accept, my dear unknown friend, my most sincere greetings.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn