

A compendium of marvels

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Are there things that are truly **odd** in the world, or is it **odd** that anything exists at all?

I put those questions to ChatGPT as I checked out some museum objects last week, while immersed in the geometries of IM Peiâ??s celebrated Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Amongst many artefacts, there were manuscripts on display labelled with statements about the wisdom they contained, but with little indication of what insights those open pages might contain.

I was not inquiring as an academic scholar of Islamic texts. A real scholar would be able to draw on a large context of critical reading. I was just a curious visitor looking at ornate pages in Arabic text that curators had positioned carefully within glass cabinets.

The first challenge for me was translation. I aimed my smartphone at one of the open books that displayed a table of symbols in different colours. I took a photograph of the page and dispatched it to ChatGPT. Its reply included the following:

> This is not a continuous prose text (like a narrative, prayer, or letter). It is a technical/mystical manuscript combining: Arabic script (in red ink, mainly headings and glosses); Non-Arabic symbolic alphabets (in black ink); Letterâ??number correspondences and sigils.

It seems that each page of the book mapped Arabic letters to phonetic or numerical equivalents: â??These systems are intended for calculation, invocation, or symbolic reasoning rather than for direct reading.â?•

I wanted something more prose-like, so I turned to an open book that showed the cycles of the moon on one page with a dense block of Arabic text on the other. My subsequent exchange with ChatGPT revealed the following interpretation (rather than translation).

> The author explains that the Moon moves through a fixed sequence of positions during the course of the month, and that each position has a distinct character and effect. By observing the Moonâ??s location at a given time, and by consulting the accompanying circular diagram, the practitioner can determine which activities are favourable or unfavourable.

At this moment I was less interested in astrology. I eventually alighted on a book with an interesting diagram and text with object label: â??Folio from Aja to al-makhlugat wa ghara ib al-mawjudat (*The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*) written by Zakariyya al-Qazwini. (d. 682 AH / 1283 CE).â?•



The phrase â??the Oddities of Existenceâ?• caught my eye. ChatGPT told me about the open pages:

> This is a cosmographicalâ??natural-historical passage, not geometry in the strict sense. The museum label helps a great deal: this folio comes from Zakariyya al-QazwÄ«nÄ«â??s *Ê¿AjÄ•Ê¾ib al-makhlÅ«qÄ•t wa-gharÄ•Ê¾ib al-mawjÅ«dÄ•t* (*The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*), one of the most influential illustrated encyclopaedias in the medieval Islamic world. What you are seeing is a diagrammatic account of the structure and ordering of the world, mixing natural philosophy, cosmology, zoology, and moral interpretation.

The AI platform told me that the circular diagram shows a â??cosmological enclosureâ?• â?? the world conceived as an ordered whole. Inside it are animals and figures arranged symbolically.

After further explanation of the diagram, ChatGPT informed me that the prose on the right-hand page is expository. It offered a paraphrase.

> The author explains how certain animals are disposed within the created order, describing their forms, behaviours, and places in the world. Each creature is assigned a role that reflects divine wisdom and balance. Their physical characteristics are linked to their

> environments, and their existence is presented as evidence of purposeful design rather than chance. The reader is invited to contemplate these arrangements as signs of the underlying order of creation.

It seems that the text is based on observation informed by authority inherited from Aristotle, Galen, and the QurÊ¾anic tradition. It posited that the diagram is â??doing something close to what we might now call **systems thinking**â?• rather than empirical reasoning, though I would have needed more reasoning about that parallel.

The AI informed me that the *Ê¿AjÄ•Ê¾ib al-makhlÅ«qÄ•t* was popular because it: offered a coherent picture of the world, bridged scholarly learning and popular curiosity, and trained readers to see order, analogy, and correspondences everywhere.

> This page explains the **ordering and meaning of living beings within the cosmic whole**, using image and text together to show how the diversity of animals reflects an underlying, intelligible structure of creation.

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Then I raised the question: â??Oddities of existenceâ?• Do you think the text refers to the fact that some things that exist seem odd, or the oddity that anything exists at all?

The AI asserted that the ambiguity is â??real rather than accidental,â?• explaining that in Arabic, the key word is ***gharÄ•Ê¾ib*** (ØºØ±Ø§Ø¦Ø¨) which sits in a semantic field that does *not* map cleanly onto a single English sense of â??oddâ?•. It then described a â??narrow sense,â?• usual meaning of ***gharÄ•Ê¾ib***, simply referring to things that are strange, marvellous and deviate from the familiar. The book would have served as a â??compendium of marvels.â?•

It seems that what is â??strangeâ?• is not irrational or chaotic. It is strange **because it exceeds habitual understanding**. Strangeness functions as a prompt to *reflection*. But the book nudges the reader toward the more radical view:

> the oddity that such an ordered, diverse, and excessive world exists at all.

It appears that these marvels are signs rather than curiosities: â??The oddness is not a defect in the thing, but a feature of our limited perspective.â?• The AI then reflected on the title of the piece.

> The brilliance of the title is that it allows both readings simultaneously: On the surface: *some things are strange*; At a deeper level: *existence itself, in its richness and variety, is strange*. The catalogue of odd creatures quietly accumulates into a more radical intuition: the world is **not self-explanatory**, even when it is orderly.

A reference to ideas from Phenomenology was planted no doubt by my prior exchanges in the LLM context window. The AI posited that the book â??oscillates between: **ontic oddities** (this creature, that phenomenon), and a muted **ontological wonder** (that there is anything at all, and that it hangs together). Not Heidegger avant la lettreâ??but not entirely alien to that line of thought either.â?•

I asked if any western scholars directly reference this ambiguity in the Arabic text? It answered in the affirmative with reference to Travis Zadeh, and Ã?oÅ?kunâ??s study of early Ottoman cosmographies.

> A small number of anglophone (and more broadly â??Westernâ?•) scholars have **explicitly foregrounded the semantic slipperiness** of **Ê¿ajÄ•Ê¾ib** and **gharÄ•Ê¾ib** â?? including how the second half of the title can be heard not only as â??odd things that existâ?• but also as â??the astonishing aspects of what exists.â?•

As ever, the conversation could have continued. An image search on Google generated a translation of the text, and further elucidation of the text and its context.

For me, this exchange further reinforces the radical alteration AI brings to scholarship: new practices of knowledge, search, acquisition, interpretation, verification and attribution â?? the LLMâ??s access to all text as a compendium of marvels.

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