In the third/ninth-century Islamic world we encounter people of whom it is said that they denied the existence of God, angels, prophets, spirits, the resurrection, post-mortem reward and punishment, and the afterlife altogether. In effect, they rejected the entire metaphysical realm as either false or beyond the limits of human reasoning, on the understanding that there was no point in trying to know about anything unless it was accessible to human reasoning. It was this understanding which made them radical even when or if they were willing to consider the possibility of a reality beyond us: they did not accept revelation as an alternative source of knowledge. They were empiricists in the sense that they held all genuine knowledge to be based on sense impressions in conjunction with reasoning. The sources call them Dahrīs, eternalists, aṣḥāb al-hayūlā, adherents of prime matter, and aṣḥāb al-ṭabāʾiʿ, adherents of the four “natures”, i.e. the four elementary qualities (heat, cold, moisture, and dryness) of which they held the world to be composed. It is not in the third/ninth century alone that we hear of them: there are intimations that they existed earlier and the polemics against them continue down to at least the sixth/eleventh century. But it seems to have been in the third/ninth century that they attracted most attention.1

The Dahrīs sound so weirdly out of place in the early Islamic world that modern Islamicists often have trouble believing that they really existed, unless they have studied them themselves.2 No Dahrī writings survive, most of the evidence is polemical, and with some minor exceptions no individual Dahrīs are known by name, so it comes naturally to suspect that all there is to them

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2 I have never encountered any doubts about their reality in the literature on them, but suspicion of polemical invention is a common response to oral presentations of their views.
is heresiographical stereotyping and construction of the “other”. This makes the testimony of al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869) particularly important. He is one out of many Muʿtazilites who wrote on the Dahrīs in the third/ninth century, but the others wrote refutations and heresiographical accounts of the Dahrīs, and their works are lost except for extracts in later sources. Al-Jāḥiẓ, by contrast, wrote as a littérateur, most of his work is extant, and though his attitude to the Dahrīs is also polemical, he gives us a vivid picture of them as a live presence. In what follows I go through the information he provides, restraining myself from the temptation to adduce material from other ninth-century sources, so that the reader will have a clean picture of the Dahrīs as perceived by a single, contemporary author.

Overall Portrait

Most of al-Jāḥiẓ’s references to Dahrīs are found in his book on animals, and the single most informative passage comes in the last volume of that work. It is long and convoluted, and it starts with a relative clause of which the first part goes on for so long that it can be read either as incomplete or as completed in a way suggesting that the author (or copyist) had himself lost his sense of where he was. I have read it as incomplete and inserted some words that seem to be missing; the alternative is to remove two that would be superfluous, and the reader can construe the sentence either way, as I have underlined the words that introduce the relative cause and those that could be taken to initiate its

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