

# Beauty and Aesthetics in Classical Islamic Thought: An Introduction\*

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PLATO ONCE WROTE in the *Symposium* that “if there is anything worth living for, it is to behold beauty”. Beauty has been at the heart of the Mediterranean philosophical tradition since Plato uttered these words. But the full scope of beauty for Plato included more than just shapes, colors, proportion, harmony, and melodies. In addition to physical objects it also included psychological and social ones, characters and political systems, virtues and truths. It included not only things that are a joy to see and hear, but everything which causes admiration, arouses delight, and brings enjoyment.<sup>1</sup> Although beauty was beheld and appreciated subjectively, for the most part it was considered an objective aspect of reality. But to what end? For none other than to behold the supreme beauty of The Good that transcends its worldly manifestations. Plato’s notion of beauty was very broad and included moral and cognitive values. This was not Plato’s personal idea, but the generally accepted view in the West and the Islamic east well into the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

However, for the past two centuries, discussions of beauty have revolved around the field of inquiry we now call ‘aesthetics’. The term *aesthetics* derives from the Greek *aisthetikos* (sensitive, perceptive) and from *aisthanesthai* (to perceive by the senses or by the mind, to feel). The Greek *aisthesis* and *aistheta* mean “things perceptible by the senses”. Therefore, aesthetics initially had nothing to do with “beauty” or “art” as it is currently understood, so how did it become associated with beauty?

It is at the hands of Alexander Baumgarten (d. 1762) in the eighteenth century that aesthetics reaches its apotheosis as a separate branch of philosophy, like logic, concerned with the study, understanding, and exploration of that which is perceivable by the senses. Since beauty is the most perfect kind of knowledge the senses can have, Baumgarten reasoned, then beauty and its effect on the beholder became the central focus of aesthetic investigations.

The term was popularized in English by the translation of Immanuel Kant (d. 1804), and used originally in its etymological sense as “the science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception”. Kant had tried to correct Baumgarten, but the meaning Baumgarten had given to aesthetics attained popularity in English by the mid-nineteenth century and removed the word from any philosophical basis. It eventually

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\* This paper is intended as a preliminary exploration and is the first in a series of papers to come.

<sup>1</sup> Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz et al., eds., *History of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2005), 1:113–14.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Whitehead wasn’t exaggerating when he said: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 39.

became associated with the late nineteenth-century movement that advocated “art for art’s sake”, whereby aesthetics became merely pre-occupied with the subjective manner in which beauty is experienced. As such it is a notion with firm roots in a specific Western cultural and philosophical context.

By the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the so-called Liberal Age, Arab thinkers were appropriating many Western categories and developing an Arab aesthetics along similar lines.<sup>3</sup> However, “aesthetics” has no direct Arabic equivalent. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* includes an entry titled “*ilm al-jamal*”, which is a modern-day rendering. In the entry the author writes that a general theory on aesthetics and “precise definitions for the terms used in this field are lacking in the history of Arab civilization”.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if aesthetics is understood as a theory of art or beauty for its own sake then the medieval Islamic mentality yielded no comparable ‘aesthetics’.

If indeed aesthetics is a cultural and intellectual development peculiar to the West then it is no surprise that Islam has no equivalent term or tradition. Coining neologisms like *ilm al-jamal* or “Islamic aesthetics” may be anachronistic and the scholar can either abandon all use of the term or else engage with it critically. I have opted for the second option.<sup>5</sup>

The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* entry goes on to state quite rightly that “nevertheless, it is possible to trace [in Arabic/Islamic thought] certain features common to the elements of aesthetic emotion and to their formal expression”.<sup>6</sup> The lack of an exact Arabic equivalent to aesthetics, therefore, does not mean that the correlata suggested by the term “aesthetics” in modern discourse (perception, beauty, pleasure, image, form, proportion, harmony, color, creativity, art, etc.) were not discussed. They were discussed at length but within often multiple and diverse discourses. Muslims not only enjoyed beauty but promoted the fine arts. What De Bruyne says about medieval Europe is also valid for medieval Islam: “The fact that the medieval authors did not develop a systematic theory of the arts does not mean that they were not aware of the relationship between art and beauty.”<sup>7</sup> For example, if we understand aesthetics to refer to a wide range of issues connected with beauty then the medieval Islamic tradition did have aesthetic theories. These theories were enmeshed in theological, philosophical, or jurisprudential discussions or within wider intellectual contexts (literature, optics, alchemy) and not as a *sui generis* topic in any modern sense. The precise nature of beauty depends on the author, period, and school of thought under consideration.

Likewise if we understand aesthetics to refer to issues of an artistic nature, here again we find the medieval Islamic tradition replete with discussions and references to art, crafts, creativity, aesthetic pleasure, and the like.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no *l’art pour l’art*.<sup>9</sup> It must be understood that the realm of the aesthetic was much larger than it is nowadays and our investigation must take this broader perspective. Umberto Eco, in his seminal work *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, aptly summarizes our point here:

We must look for the ways in which a given epoch solved for itself aesthetic problems as they presented themselves at the time to the sensibilities and the culture of its people. Then our historical inquiries will be a contribution, not to

<sup>3</sup> See Charbel Dagher, *al-Fan wa al-sharq* [Art and the East], 2 vols. (Beirut: Arab Cultural Center, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “*Ilm al-Jamal*”

<sup>5</sup> The first approach is most exemplified in the writings and teachings of what is known as the Perennialist school.

<sup>6</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. “*Ilm al-Jamal*”.

<sup>7</sup> Edgar de Bruyne, *Études d’esthétique médiévale*, trans. Eileen B. Hennessy (New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1969), 221. Other pioneering works on aesthetics include: Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*; Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); among many others.

<sup>8</sup> See Charbel Dagher, *Islamic Art in Arabic Sources* (Kuwait: Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> As Ananda Coomaraswamy has painstakingly shown, “Whereas almost all other peoples have called their theory of art or expression ‘rhetoric’ and have thought of their art as a form of knowledge, we have invented an ‘aesthetics’ and think of art as a kind of feeling.” In so far as art has become preoccupied with human sentiments and feelings it has “substituted psychological explanations for the traditional conception of art as an intellectual virtue and of beauty as pertaining to knowledge”. *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought*, ed. William Wroth (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), 1.

whatever we conceive ‘aesthetics’ to be, but rather to the history of a specific civilization, from the standpoint of its own sensibility and its own aesthetics consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

Appropriating the “aesthetic” within this broader framework we can now define it as “the problem of the possible objective character, and the subjective conditions, of what we call the experience of beauty. It thus refers also to all problems connected with the aesthetic object and aesthetic pleasure.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, any scholarly investigation into aesthetics in classical Islamic thought must take as its starting point the category of the beautiful and follow it as it leads into other “aesthetic” investigations.

This essay is a preliminary attempt to plunge into this difficult terrain and try to bring to light some of the textual sources that have discussed aesthetics at length in classical Islamic thought and some of the challenges facing the would-be scholar.<sup>12</sup>

## HISTORIOGRAPHY AND APPROACH

The sources of Islamic aesthetics in classical Islamic thought are not systematic treatises on the topic as can be found in the Classical and Christian traditions, for those are quite lacking (Islam has no equivalent to Vitruvius nor to the polemics between Abbot Suger and St. Bernard).<sup>13</sup> Unlike Christianity, which inherited most of Hellenistic culture, Islam eschewed most Hellenistic literary and cultural productions such as art and literature. It was not Homer or Sophocles that were translated into Arabic but the likes of Plato, Aristotle, and Galen. Most of the classical texts that classify the sciences in the Islamic tradition reveal a lack of a chapter or section dedicated to the topic of beauty or aesthetics. For example, the first classifier of the sciences in Islam, al-Kindi (d. 870), placed architecture and music in the chapter on mathematics whereas today they would merit sections of their own under the rubric of aesthetics. Other classifiers of the sciences followed a similar pattern. Although there are discussions of poetry, music, architecture, writing, and beauty in al-Kindi, al-Farabi (d. 950), Ikhwan al-Safa, Ibn Sina (d. 1037), and al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and a few scattered references to decorum, they were not treated as separate subjects of aesthetic interest.

What further complicates the scholarly search is the fact that a significant amount of the Islamic heritage is still in manuscript form gathering dust on library shelves in Cairo and Istanbul or languishing in derelict private collections. Access to these manuscripts remains a major challenge. For now the scholar will have to restrict the task to what is available through publications. The scholar can approach the available sources in any number of ways.

First, one could search a relatively cohesive school of thought and tease out an aesthetic particular to it. For example, an Islamic philosophical aesthetics would start with the Neoplatonic distinction between intelligible beauty and sensible beauty,<sup>14</sup> the nature of love, and poetic beauty, diction, and inspiration (al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and others).<sup>15</sup> This pursuit may be much easier up until Ghazali, but Islamic philosophy subsequent to Ghazali, and especially under the influence of Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) and Suhrawardi (d. 1191), fused with *tasawwuf* and kalam and addressed issues not of a purely peripatetic nature. An Islamic philosophical aesthetics would have to include

<sup>10</sup> A comparable lack of a developed theory of art in its modern sense is equally lacking in medieval Europe as medieval historians have already indicated. Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 2. See also Ernst Robert Curtis, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. Frederick Hopman (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965); Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>12</sup> The term “classical” is used to refer to the development of Islamic thought between the tenth and eighteenth centuries, with a focus on the period up and till the thirteenth century.

<sup>13</sup> There are a number of reasons that have been put forward as to why Islam lacks any explicit treatment of art. Perhaps one explanation is the relative lack of controversy such as the iconoclastic movement of the seventh century in Byzantium or the arguments between Abbot Suger and St. Bernard. Both instances were fraught with fierce debate over the nature of representation and the Divine. Islam’s eschewing of representation altogether at an early stage may have spared it the fierce, yet, in retrospect, very informative debates over the meaning and nature of art.

<sup>14</sup> The philosophical treatment of beauty must be understood within the context of the Neoplatonic philosophy of emanation. Particularly important for their discussion of beauty was the fourth chapter of the Arabic compilation known as the *Theology of Aristotle* (incorrectly attributed to Aristotle) especially the paraphrase of Plotinus’s *Ennead*, vol. 8, “On Intelligible Beauty”. Against the background of this text, Islamic philosophers (particularly al-Farabi and Ibn Sina) developed the differences between sensible and intelligible beauty and the love and pleasure associated with each.

<sup>15</sup> Salim Kemal, “Aesthetics”, in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), 2:969–79.

mystical philosophies that do not exclude mystical intuition as a means of knowing the world and God. In his chapter “Philosophy and Ways of Seeing” in *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*, Oliver Leaman ventured an exposition of an *ishraqi* aesthetics and its possible link to Islamic art, which is a very promising line of research. Much more work has yet to be done. Thus an Islamic philosophical aesthetic would be a much-needed contribution to the history of philosophical aesthetics and to contemporary debates.

A Sufi mystical aesthetics would look at writings on the nature of beauty, love, perception, the image and imagination, the human form, inner versus outer, and the psychology of beauty (particularly Abu Hamid and Ahmad al-Ghazali, Ruzbihan Baqli, Suhrawardi, and Ibn ‘Arabi). Given the Sufi preoccupation with Divine Love as the leitmotif for creation and the cosmos as the manifestation of Divine Beauty, Sufi texts provide the richest source of aesthetic reflections and writings available in the Islamic tradition.<sup>16</sup>

An equally promising and more widely diffused and culturally important discourse would be an Islamic theological (kalam) aesthetics. The *mutakallim* or ‘Islamic scholastic theologian’ engaged in such an exploration might find it useful to critically engage with the Western tradition that has developed theological aesthetics in the twentieth century into a field of investigation of its own.<sup>17</sup> Theological aesthetics in the West has been defined as being “concerned with questions about God and issues in theology in the light of and perceived through sense knowledge (sensation, feeling, imagination), through beauty, and the arts.”<sup>18</sup> Such a definition is broad enough to act as a working definition for our would-be *mutakallim*. Given that kalam engaged with *falsafa* (philosophy), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *tasawwuf* (Sufism) throughout its complex history, an Islamic theological aesthetic would cover almost all of the terrain covered by a philosophical aesthetic, and a mystical Sufi aesthetic, in addition to kalam’s traditional theological discussions on the signs of God in nature, discussions about the Attributes, and the inimitability of the Qur’an (Mu‘tazalis, Ash‘aris, al-Baqillani, Ghazali) and the dangers of sensuous pleasure (Ibn al-Qayyim) among other topics. An Islamic theological aesthetic is a welcome development and the recovery of the meaning of beauty and the beautiful in the contemporary Islamic world is an urgent need.

New directions for research can be found in numerous other fields. A literary aesthetics or *adab* would consider discussions of imagery and metaphor in poetry (al-Jahiz, al-Qartajani, al-Jurjani, etc.) revealing an indigenous Arab-Islamic poetics independent of Aristotle’s poetics.<sup>19</sup> One can also discover other aesthetic theories in discussions of vision and how the perception of an object affects the perceiver such as we find in the field of optics (Ibn al-Haytham). Abdelhamid Sabra has pioneered the study of perception and optics in Ibn al-Haytham, and Nader El-Bizri has shown its relevance for the development of *perspectiva* in the Renaissance.<sup>20</sup> In his recent book *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* Hans Belting extended this path of inquiry to develop an answer to the question why perspective did not develop in the Islamic World.<sup>21</sup> Although tangential to discussions of beauty, alchemical discussions on how one thing can be made to appear as another (Jabir Ibn Hayyan), oneiric writings on dreams and the imagination (al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ghazali, Ibn ‘Arabi, Suhrawardi, etc.), and lexicographic sources have much to contribute to broader

<sup>16</sup> See Samir Mahmoud, “Idols, Icons, and As-If Images: Towards a Theology of the Image in the Islamic Aesthetics of Ibn ‘Arabi”, *Kalam: Journal of Islamic Theology* (forthcoming). In this article I show how Ibn ‘Arabi’s reading of the Islamic ritual prayer is the first and most comprehensive account of the nature of the image of God, aniconism, and its relation to the Christian icon.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological masterpiece *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 16 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

<sup>18</sup> Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>19</sup> There is already a large and rich body of literature on Arabic poetics. For example, see Kamal Abu Deeb, *Al-Jurjani’s Theory of Poetic Imagery* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1979).

<sup>20</sup> See Nader El-Bizri, “Classical Optics and the Perspectiva Traditions Leading to the Renaissance”, in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, ed. Charles Carman and John Hendrix (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 11–30.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

aesthetic discussions.<sup>22</sup> This approach to the sources has yet to receive the attention it deserves and investigations of this kind will prove quite fruitful in demonstrating the existence of multiple aesthetic traditions in classical Islamic thought.

Second, one can search the oeuvre of one single author for references to “beauty” and “aesthetics” correlata and then try to reconstruct a specific theory of beauty or aesthetics and trace its evolution throughout the author’s work. In the area of Islamic studies no comparable work exists except for the pioneering work of José Miguel Puerta Vilchez on medieval Arabic aesthetics *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe, al-Andalus y la estética árabe clásica*. Vilchez’s great achievement is to have demonstrated, through his examination of original sources, the existence of several medieval Arab/Islamic aesthetic sensibilities. His survey of the medieval Islamic intellectual thinking on aesthetics is breathtaking. From Abbasid poetics and al-Farabi to Ibn Sina, Ibn Hazm, and Ibn al-Haytham, and from Hazim al-Qartajani and Ghazali to Ibn ‘Arabi, Vilchez leaves no possible source unexplored. Vilchez’s is the only anthology-long work on classical Arab/Islamic aesthetics.<sup>23</sup>

Third, one could approach the topic thematically by choosing a specific theme and then go about archaeologically digging through the sources for all that has been written about it. A case can be made for several important themes that seem to be of central concern whenever the topic of beauty is discussed in the Islamic tradition: the beauty of God; intelligible vs. sensible beauty; the symbolism of light; proportion and harmony; the dangers of the gaze; psychology of beauty; the image, imagination, and beauty; creativity and beauty; the human form; and many others. These topics may not have been thematized in Islamic thought as separate fields of investigation but that does not mean they are not there in *potentia*. Thematization, through asking the right kinds of questions, crystalizes a wide range of material into a coherent form whence previously there was no form. This third approach usually relies on the meticulous work done by scholars of the first and second approaches and has its own challenges. For one, it presupposes an expertise in several areas of Islamic studies across a long stretch of time. For example, “the symbolism of light” would cover the Qur’anic light verse, its related exegeses, the hadith references to the *visio dei* as one of light, kalam debates over the *visio dei*, Ibn Sina’s reference to the Supreme Being as a dazzling light, Ghazali’s *Mishkat al-anwar*, Ibn Rushd on God as light, and of course Akbarian and *ishraqi* light mysticism up until the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

It is more accurate, then, to conclude from all of this that medieval Islamic civilization possessed not one but several aesthetic sensibilities. Oliver Leaman seems to suggest as much and the sources bear out his contention.<sup>25</sup> This is why it is necessary to refer to Islamic *sensibilities* in the plural rather than *sensibility* in the singular. Certainly, the Sufi view that understands the phenomenal reality of multiplicity as fundamentally unreal and envisages a realm of being that is more real yields a very different aesthetics than one that envisages the phenomenal world as solely the realm of physical and worldly pleasure.

One of the tasks facing the scholar and historian of beauty and aesthetics in classical Islamic thought could be to prepare the monographs on which more generalized studies can rely. In the limited space available in the rest of this paper, I will begin with an excursus through the etymology of the word *jamal* and its occurrences in the Qur’an and

<sup>22</sup> See Charbel Dagher, *Madhabib al-busn* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-‘Arabi, 1998); Adam Mestyan, “Arabic Lexicography and European Aesthetics: the Origin of *Fam*”, *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World* 28 (2011): 69–100.

<sup>23</sup> There are also smaller and more specialized works such as: Richard Ettinghausen, “Al-Ghazali on Beauty”, in *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, ed. Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1981), 21–31; Carole Hillenbrand, “Some Aspects of al-Ghazali’s Views on Beauty”, in *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit* [God is beautiful and He loves beauty] (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1994), 249–67; Valérie Gonzalez, “Beauty and Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Thought”, in *Beauty in Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), wherein she surveys the works of Ibn Hazm, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn al-Haytham. There are the more recent book-length works by Mohammed Hamdouni Alami on al-Jahiz *Art and Architecture in the Islamic Tradition: Aesthetics, Politics, and Desire in Early Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), and Cyrus Ali Zargar, *Sufi Aesthetics: Beauty, Love, and the Human Form in the Writings of Ibn ‘Arabi and ‘Iraqi* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> This thematic approach is adopted by Doris Behrens-Abouseif in her *Beauty in Arabic Culture* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999). The chapter titles clearly show such a thematic method: The Religious Approach, Secular Beauty and Love, Music and Belles Lettres, The Visual Arts. Further subsections have titles like: Symbolism of Light, Fauna, Human Beauty, Love, and Literary Criticism. Her attempt at such an investigation, however, has led to premature conclusions and a truncated account of beauty in medieval Islamic culture.

<sup>25</sup> Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

then explore two traditional topics in classical Islamic thought that are of contemporary relevance from an aesthetic point of view. The first is from *kalam* and the second is the overarching theme of “the gaze”, which are examples of the first and third approaches discussed earlier, respectively. I shall have to leave the second approach, which would have focused on a single author, for a separate essay altogether. The following discussion is not meant to be exhaustive but representative only and it is hoped it will raise questions that can be pursued further.

## ETYMOLOGY, DEFINITION

To begin, *jamal* is the Arabic word often used to designate *beauty*. *Jamal* is derived from the consonantal root *j-m-l*. It is the verbal noun of *al-jamil* meaning ‘the beautiful’ with the causative form *jammala* meaning ‘to beautify’. In classical Arabic lexicons, *jamal* is defined as “beauty in actions and constitution”. It can be applied to the form (*surwar*) or meaning (*ma‘ani*) of things. There are many Arabic synonyms for *jamal* such as *husn*,<sup>26</sup> which figures in the Qur’an and primarily refers to moral goodness or else divine beauty and beneficence. While the Qur’an refers to both *husn* and *jamal* interchangeably in an ethical and aesthetic sense, the terms have gradually come to refer to different aspects of beauty: *husn* is related to action and moral goodness while *jamal* is related to beauty of form.<sup>27</sup> With time Muslim theologians, particularly Sufis, began categorizing the divine epithets into two groups: attributes of majesty (*sifat al-jalal*) and attributes of beauty (*sifat al-jamal*).<sup>28</sup>

*Malih*, a more common word, carries the connotation of ‘delectable’ or ‘tasty’ on account of adding salt to something. Another synonym *wasim* usually refers to human beauty. In this paper I shall be exploring the terms *jamal* and *‘ilm al-jamal* or the ‘science of beauty’, which we may equate with aesthetics. However, as we shall see, even *jamal* is not inseparable from moral and epistemological considerations.

## QUR’ANIC CONTEXT

The Qur’an mentions *jamal* in a restricted sense and at least eight times, once as a verbal noun and the others as an adjective in an ethical context such as when God describes Jacob’s patience (*sabr*) at the realization that his son Joseph may have been killed by the wolves: “And they came with false blood on his shirt. He said: ‘Nay, but your minds have beguiled you into something. [My course is] comely patience (*sabr jamil*). And Allah it is whose help is to be sought in that [predicament] which ye describe” (Qur’an 12:18; see also 12:83, 70:5); or when He describes forgiveness: “We created not the heavens and the earth and all that is between them save with truth, and lo! the Hour is surely coming. So forgive, O Muhammad, with a gracious forgiveness (*safh jamil*)” (15:85; see also 33:49, 33:28).

The exception to the Qur’anic use of beauty in an ethical context is the verse where beauty is described as an attribute of things: “And wherein is beauty (*jamal*) for you, when ye bring them [camel and horses] home, and when ye take them out to pasture” (16:6).

The Qur’an is also replete with expressions denoting ‘beauty’ such as *zina* (decorum), which is used quite extensively in the Qur’an in both a positive and negative sense. In the active sense *zayyana* (to beautify, to embellish) has a positive meaning such as: “And verily in the heaven We have set mansions of the stars, and We have beautified (*zayyanna*) it for beholders” (15:16); or as ornament: “Lo! We have placed all that

<sup>26</sup> The debate in the Islamic tradition on the moral goodness of human action revolves around the *husn* and *qubb* of an action. For a summary of this debate, see Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madarij al-salikin*, ed. Muhammad Rashid Rida (Cairo: Matba‘at al-Manar, 1330–33/1912–15).

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1432/2011), s.v. “*j-m-l*”.

<sup>28</sup> Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relations in Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 102.

is in the earth as an ornament (*zina*) thereof that We may try them: which of them is best in conduct” (18:7; see also 49:7, 50:6, 67:5). We can conclude from these verses that *zina* or beauty is intrinsic to the nature of things and is intended by God in His creation. In this sense, the Qur’an anticipates later kalam discussions for the proof of God from the beauty, harmony, and order of the cosmos and the philosophical insistence that “the beauty (*jamal*) and splendor (*baha*) of all things consists in that everything has to be as it has to be”.<sup>29</sup>

Beauty is also discussed in the Qur’an as a form of human ornament (7:25, 16:14, 18:30, 35:12, 43:71, 76:21) and so even jewelry and decoration are not to be dismissed as superfluous but are part of God’s creation. Therefore, the Qur’an valorizes sensual beauty and does not see it as intrinsically problematic.

On the other hand, the Qur’an also uses the word *zina* in a negative sense to represent vanity, distraction, and illusion. The passive verbal form, *zuyyina* (made beautiful or beautified), appears in the Qur’an to suggest that beauty may become a veil over the true nature of things: “Beautified (*zuyyina*) for mankind is love of the joys [that come] from women and offspring, and stored up heaps of gold and silver, and horses branded [with their mark], and cattle and land. That is comfort of the life of the world. Allah! With Him is a more excellent abode” (3:14; see also Q 2:212, 6:43, 6:122, 6:137, 8:48, 9:37, 10:12, 10:24, 13:33, 15:39, 16:63, 27:24, 29:38, 35:8, 40:37, 41:25, 47:14, 48:12). The following verse is also illustrative of this negative sense: “Know that the life of this world is only play, and idle talk, and pageantry (*zina*), and boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children; as the likeness of vegetation after rain, whereof the growth is pleasing to the husbandman, but afterward it drieth up and thou seest it turning yellow then it becometh straw. And in the Hereafter there is grievous punishment, and [also] forgiveness from Allah and His good pleasure, whereas the life of the world is but matter of illusion” (57:20). These Qur’anic references to the negative aspect of *zina* led to the development of a body of literature on the censuring of the gaze or its purification. We shall discuss this in a later section.

The Qur’an also perceptively refers to the effects of beauty upon the perceiver’s eye or soul when it uses terms like gladdening (*tusirru* from *surur*), pleasure (*‘ajab*), and delight/sweetness of the eye (*lidhdhat al-‘ayn*): “Verily she is a yellow cow. Bright is her color, gladdening (*tusirru*) beholders” (2:69); the cow gladdens because of its exquisite beauty. Addressing His prophet God says (33:52): “It is not allowed thee to take [other] women henceforth nor that thou shouldst change them for other wives even though their beauty (*busn*) pleased (*‘ajabaka*) thee” (33:52). Describing paradise the Qur’an says: “Therein are brought round for them trays of gold and goblets, and therein is all that souls desire and eyes find sweet (*lidhdhat al-‘ayn*)” (43:71). We also read: “Is not He [best] who created the heavens and the earth, and sendeth down for you water from the sky wherewith We cause to spring forth joyous (*bahja*) orchards, whose trees it never hath been yours to cause to grow” (27:60); and: “Therefore Allah hath warded off from them the evil of that day, and hath made them find brightness (*nadra*) and joy” (76:11; see also 83:24).

Qur’anic commentaries on these verses provide a wide range of meditations on the meaning of *jamal* and its cognates and await the work of a patient and meticulous scholar.

<sup>29</sup> José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe* (Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 1997), 587–8, who cites Ibn Sina’s *Kitab al-naja*; Gonzalez, “Beauty and Aesthetic Experience”, 14.

## KALAM'S ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: THE PROOF FROM DESIGN

Kalam or Islamic scholastic theology is a rich source of speculation on a wide variety of topics central to the Islamic religion. Kalam originated as a rational discourse in defense of articles of basic Islamic belief but soon developed into a rational dialectic that operates on theological concepts. Though kalam debates are not always explicitly about beauty many do have an “aesthetic” aspect. For the purposes of this survey I shall briefly explore the argument for the existence of God from design.

The argument on whether belief in God should be founded on a rational basis has a long and complex history in Islamic thought. Early scholastic theologians (*mutakallimun*) held that rational reflection (*nazar*) was an indispensable tool for establishing belief in God on a sound footing while traditionalist theologians held the view that a simple belief that accorded with scriptural creeds sufficed. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Ghazali argued that knowledge of God's existence was innate (*fitra*) and did not require discursive reasoning. Rational proofs were needed for those few whose *fitra* was unsound or suffered from doubts. Ghazali argued further for direct experience or witnessing of God, which renders all other methods of knowing God superfluous.

The rational proofs for God's existence were categorized by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) into four different types. The one that concerns us here is the teleological argument or the argument from design, which argues that the manifest order of the cosmos points to a God who willed it this way. The Qur'an (3:191) itself directs the reader to this mode of thinking. Perhaps the most powerful Qur'anic reference to the beauty of the cosmos is: “He perfected the creation of everything that He created (*absana kulla shayin khalaqahu*)” (32:7). This verse and the meaning of *absana* and *ihsan* have triggered some of the most elaborate theological, philosophical, and mystical writings in the Islamic tradition that tackle the issue of design and has a long history in Islamic thought and included major figures like al-Kindi (d. 873), Abu Bakr al-Razi (d. 925), Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), Ghazali, Ibn Rusd (d. 1198), and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi. The argument, as Razi puts it, sounds something like this:

Whoever contemplates the various parts of the higher and lower worlds will find that this world is constructed in the most advantageous and best manner, and the most superlative and perfect order (*tartib*). The mind unambiguously testifies that this state of affairs cannot be except by the governance (*tadbir*) of a wise and knowledgeable [being].<sup>30</sup>

What stands out in Razi's argument, as Ayman Shihadeh has aptly shown, is a distinction between two types of evidence for design. The first is that of providence and the second that of order. The advantages (*manafi*) that Razi refers to imply a God who shows beneficence (*ihsan*) towards His creatures, while the signs of order or masterly order (*ihkam, itqan*) in the world refer to a God possessed of wisdom (*hikma*).

Very early on al-Kindi had referred to the first type of evidence as the argument from providence (*dalil inaya*) when he said: “The orderly and wonderful phenomena of nature could not be purposeless and accidental.”<sup>31</sup> The classical Islamic theologian Baqillani put it succinctly when he stated that “the world must have a Maker and Fashioner

<sup>30</sup> Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *al-Matalib al-'aliya min al-'ilm al-ilabi*, ed. Ahmad al-Saqqa, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1987), 1:233; Ayman Shihadeh, “The Existence of God”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 202.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver Leaman, *Contemporary Issues in Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 37.

(*mubdiith wa musawwir*) just as writing must have a writer, a picture must have a painter, and a building a builder”.<sup>32</sup>

But it is the second type of evidence that concerns us the most, the evidence from order, because of the manner in which the *mutakallimun* meditated on the loci of contemplation (*mahal al-i'tibar*) in the cosmos. Razi takes his cue from the Qur'an itself: “Verily, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth, and the succession of night and day: and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man: and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after it had, been lifeless, and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon: and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth—[in all this] there are messages indeed for people who use their reason” (2:164). For Razi this verse contains eight types of evidence or loci. In the lower world these are: the human body, the human psyche, animals, plants, minerals, meteorological phenomena, seas, mountains, the elements, and the general symbiotic relationship between them all that upholds such order therein. In the higher world these are: the celestial spheres and the planets (their magnitudes, complex motions, and their influence on the lower world), the daily, monthly, and annual cycles that result from the movement of the celestial bodies, the dependency of things in the world on the sun's motion, and the marvels of the fixed and moving stars.<sup>33</sup>

What was so appealing to the *mutakallimun* about the argument from design, and what is still so relevant today, is its foundation in an empirical epistemology. Working through a physico-theological proof we come to know God through our senses, reason, and our entire being. This empirical procedure is perfectly suited to the requirements of reason defended by kalam but it is much more, and it is in this much more that we are staking our claim for its “aesthetic” relevance.

The design argument is not solely rational but contains elements of the affective and intuitive. It was not merely about being rationally swayed by the force of the arguments concerning design but also affectively convinced by the design itself, namely, the cosmos. Ghazali dedicated an entire book to the argument from design and what strikes the reader is the aesthetic contemplation to which it invites. In his *al-Hikma fi makbluqat Allah* he refers in the introduction to the Qur'anic verse (10:101), which is an invitation to “deep thinking (*tafakkur*) concerning the wonder of His creation” that ultimately leads to “certainty taking root” in the depths of one's soul.<sup>34</sup> In a moment reminiscent of a profound Romantic sensibility Ghazali contemplates the beauty of a tree, which stands there with its “roots deep in the earth to absorb water; its branches, leaves, and fruits nurtured thereof; the earth a nurturing mother on whose bosom the tree's branches and leaves suckle”.<sup>35</sup>

Commenting on verse (3:191) Razi says: “If the tongue is immersed in remembrance and the bodily organs in thankfulness, and mind in thought, the whole servant will be immersed in all his parts in servanthood. . . . How comely is this order of drawing spirits from creation to their Creator.” This suggests that one's entire being is addressed by the Divine and the response can only be likewise by one's entire being in a deeply contemplative moment.

Although not explicitly dealing with aesthetics, the kalam argument for the existence of God through design contains rich aesthetic implications. If one looks at some of Ghazali and Razi's descriptions of nature and cosmic order one sees that the human sense of awe, wonder, and pleasure in the face of the beauty of God's creation is integrated

<sup>32</sup> Majid Fakhry, “The Classical Islamic Arguments for the Existence of God”, *The Muslim World* 47 (1957): 133–45; al-Baqillani, *al-Tambid* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-‘Arabi, 1366/1947), 45.

<sup>33</sup> al-Razi, *al-Matalib al-‘aliya*, 233–6; Shihadeh, “Existence of God”, 202–3. Razi has a remarkably detailed meditation on this verse (Qur'an 2:164) in his *Great Commentary on the Qur'an* that echoes what has been said above.

<sup>34</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *al-Hikma fi makbluqat Allah*, ed. Muhammad Rashid Qabbani (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-‘Ulum, 1398/1978), 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>36</sup> al-Razi, *al-Matalib al-aliya*, 236; Shihadeh, “Existence of God”, 204.

<sup>37</sup> al-Razi, *al-Matalib al-aliya*, 239; Shihadeh, “Existence of God”, 204; a similar strategy is also adopted by William Paley, *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (Landisville, PA: Coachwhip Publications, 2005), 182.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13–15. See also: “God has reason to make a basically beautiful world, although also reason to leave some of the beauty or ugliness of the world within the power of creatures to determine; but he would seem to have overriding reason not to make a basically ugly world beyond the powers of creatures to improve. Hence, if there is a God there is more reason to expect a basically beautiful world than a basically ugly one. A priori, however, there is no particular reason for expecting a basically beautiful rather than a basically ugly world. In consequence, if the world is beautiful, that fact would be evidence for God’s existence. For, in this case, if we let  $k$  be ‘there is an orderly physical universe’,  $e$  be ‘there is a beautiful universe’, and  $h$  be ‘there is a God’,  $P(e/h.k)$  will be greater than  $P(e/k)$ . . . . Few, however, would deny that our universe (apart from its animal and human inhabitants, and aspects subject to their immediate control) has that beauty. Poets and painters and ordinary men down the centuries have long admired the beauty of the orderly procession of the heavenly bodies, the scattering of the galaxies through the heavens (in some ways random, in some ways orderly), and the rocks, sea, and wind interacting on earth, ‘The spacious firmament on high, and all the blue ethereal sky’, the water lapping against ‘the old eternal rocks’, and the plants of the jungle and of temperate climates, contrasting with the desert and the Arctic wastes. Who in his senses would deny that here is beauty in abundance? If we confine ourselves to the argument from the beauty of the inanimate and plant worlds, the argument surely works.” Richard Swinburne, “The Argument from Design”, in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Louis Pojman and Michael Rea (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 201.

<sup>39</sup> Frederick Robert Tennant, *Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935–37); Keith Ward, *God, Chance, and Necessity* (Oxford: One World, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> This is an important point that differentiates an Islamic aesthetics from a Christian one preoccupied with the Trinity.

into the design argument. The intrinsic harmony, order, and beauty of the cosmos are contemplative proofs of God’s hand in its creation. But it is the manner in which this argument is established that is so interesting. What stands out in both Ghazali and Razi’s argument is the sheer rhetorical power and poetic beauty of their account of the proofs from design. Although they are considered a form of rational proof, they do not hold up to rational scrutiny but rather, according to Razi, this type of argument mimics the “method (*tariqa*) of the Qur’an”, which is to combine demonstrative and rhetorical modes of discourse for maximal efficacy in humans and which is why for Razi it is the more superior argument.<sup>36</sup> This involves the faculties of sense perception and the imagination alongside reason in arriving at this contemplative truth.

These classical kalam arguments, though traditionally secondary to the proof from *creation ex nihilo* (*buduth*), are vital for contemporary debates on intelligent design. One type of argument that has been gaining philosophical momentum is called the “aesthetic argument” or the “argument from beauty” to distinguish it from other design arguments. The point of departure for such an argument is that beauty is an objective aspect of the world that is felt, known, and appreciated by everyone as somehow innate, natural, and undeniably anchored in experience. The kalam argument for the existence of God from design falls squarely within this type of aesthetic contemplation. One could call it an “aesthetic argument” in the sense that like the Qur’anic method, an argument from design is both effective and affective: effective in igniting rational reflection and affective in moving the soul. “Aesthetic arguments” for the existence of God have become of topical concern in recent philosophical debate. As Shihadeh has pointed out in regards to Razi’s rhetorical strategy, although individual arguments don’t seem convincing enough, the cumulative force of these “aesthetic” arguments may achieve certainty,<sup>37</sup> a strategy acknowledged and defended in contemporary theology by Richard Swinburne<sup>38</sup> and also by F. R. Tennant and Keith Ward, among others.<sup>39</sup>

A kalam aesthetics is as much about the perception of beauty as it is about the perception of truth. Our medieval *mutakallimun* knew this very well. It is truth that is the teleological aim of any perceptive act and in the Qur’an where *al-haqq* designates both Truth and God, the Real, God becomes the eschaton of every perceptive act. This is what is meant by the declaration of *tawhid* ‘to make one’, which the *mutakallimun* painstakingly elaborated on.<sup>40</sup> It is to realize in every perceptive act the underlying unity behind the multiplicity of phenomena.

There are yet many more areas of kalam that can be mined for aesthetic discussions such as the debate over the inimitability of the Qur’an, the nature of language and meaning, atomism,<sup>41</sup> the early Maturidi emphasis on *hikma* in creation, and so on. The promise of kalam is that it is still a living tradition that informs theoretical speculations central to Islam today. What is important to keep in mind is the manner in which kalam discussions are mutually imbricated with legalistic, philosophical, and mystical discourses.

## THE GAZE

Despite the centrality of the intelligible–sensible beauty binary to medieval Islamic philosophical and theological thought, beauty was a living moral and a psychological reality. Far from being merely a topic of intellectual conjecture or universal conceptual discourse, by far

most references to beauty speak of it as an objective, concrete, tangible, experiential, and living phenomenon of life with consequences for human well-being and the soul. Muslim theologians, philosophers, jurists, and mystics distinguished between different categories of pleasure evinced by beauty depending on the instincts and desires they satisfied and the excellence of their objects, ranging from the appetitive to the abstract and from the material to the spiritual.<sup>42</sup>

Muslim scholars also studied the various claims beauty makes on our visual capacities. As such, they took very seriously the twofold effect of beauty as either a sign/trace of God or a snare that draws the soul away from God.<sup>43</sup> The Qur'an talks about the "the glance that betrays (*kha'inat al-ayun*) and that God knows"<sup>44</sup> and at the same time, the Qur'an addresses the human being to look, stare, and contemplate the beauty of the visible cosmos with the eyes (15:16, 49:7, 50:6, 67:5). Therefore the eye is charged with a double capacity: it is either equated with passion, which leads to sin, or else with perceptive knowledge, which leads to God. Taking their cue from various Qur'anic verses, Muslim scholars developed a clear distinction between vision (*ru'ya*), sight (*hassat al-basar*), and the gaze (*nazar*). *Ru'ya* refers to the capacity of the eye to perceive the Divine and is related to well-developed theological, philosophical, and mystical debates surrounding the *visio dei*; *hassat al-basar* means the ability to see, the act of seeing, and was studied in great detail by Muslim scientists;<sup>45</sup> while *nazar*, more than just the act of seeing, has the psychological connotations of power and human will and therefore was the subject of moral and ethical strictures.

Beyond merely a legalistic trope, the crucial question of the gaze was so widely rooted in Islamic culture that it was one of its defining aspects and led to a "pedagogy of vision" in Islam, rooted in the recognition of the dual effect of beauty and its force of attraction called love. But love, which is caused by beauty, is understood quite differently whether we are looking at a Ghazali or an Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, the former an Ash'ari theologian/Sufi, the latter a Hanbali theologian/jurist.

In the *Ihya'* Ghazali deals with beauty and the beautiful in the context of his investigation into the nature of love, a topic very dear to Ghazali considering that for him the love of God is the final aim of the spiritual path. The basic articulation of this principle is aptly expressed in the following statement of his: "Everything whose perception gives pleasure and satisfaction is loved by the one who perceives it", from which Ghazali draws the conclusion that everything beautiful will be loved, because it gives pleasure. Although for Ghazali love has many causes, only beauty is loved "for its own sake and not for a benefit". This love of beauty for its own sake is most evident in our love for nature, such as the Prophetic love of "green meadow and running water", which is not enjoyed for any benefit but for its own sake. The cosmos is intrinsically beautiful *a priori*.

Although Ghazali considers the perception of beauty an innate faculty (*fitra*), it requires a different "eye" or mode of vision to perceive deeper degrees of beauty. In addition to the beauty perceivable by the senses, Ghazali refers to another kind of beauty that is perceivable by the "eye of the heart" or the "light of the inner vision" (*basira*), which perceives the beauty of the inner world (*al-batin*). The inner beauty is more perfect and greater than the outer (*al-zahir*) beauty, and the inner eye of the heart is keener in perception than the eye, hence the pleasure

<sup>42</sup> Another aspect of kalam that has a bearing on aesthetics is its atomistic theology, particularly kalam's meditations on the stuff of which the cosmos is made. See Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), where, speaking of the origins of the *muqarnas*, he suggests that "in order to represent an occasionalist view of the world, a fragmented and ephemeral-looking dome was created by applying *muqarnas* to its entire surface, from transition zone to apex. This procedure creates the comprehensive effect intended to reflect the fragmented, perishable, and transient nature of the universe while alluding to the omnipotence and eternity of God, who can keep this dome from collapsing, just as He can keep the universe from destruction", 133.

<sup>43</sup> The "psychology of beauty" is likewise another overarching theme found in Islamic thought that warrants an in-depth study.

<sup>44</sup> The Qur'anic references to the beauties of nature and paradise are extremely concrete, sensual, and positive and are suggestive of a unique blend of Platonic eros and sensualism. As Tim Winter has brilliantly shown, in contrast to the Christian description of paradise, "the Islamic paradise, by contrast, is eroticised, its maidens both 'hidden in tents', and also so exposed that their bones can be perceived beneath their skin. No prolepsis here; or rather, a patristic peccatism has been inverted completely: sexuality, and its site the privacies of the body, have become, for the Qur'anic faithful, a proleptic anticipation of the joys of the elect." The naturalism of the paradisaical garden is "portrayed with a kind of rhetorical intensification, ensuring that while our world is reliably indicative, it points to a paradisaical state of proximity whose description in scripture must be itself a veil as well as a window". Likewise, the Qur'an (24:31) perceives "conspicuous female adornment" as *fitna*, as a 'public sedition' while simultaneously valorising sexuality and hence the body, particularly the female form. See Tim Winter, "The Chador of God on Earth: The Metaphysics of the Muslim Veil", *New Blackfriars* 85, no. 996 (March 2004): 144–57.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Most notably theories of vision by al-Kindi, Ibn al-Haytham, and Kamal al-Din al-Farisi. See David Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

of the heart over the divine objects it perceives, and which are too lofty for the eye to see, more perfect and greater. They are everywhere evident for those who have the inner eye open. Ghazali's logic is that the love of the "world of appearances" is a natural love, a universal urge within every soul, even found in an atheist; but the love of the inner form is loftier and requires piercing the veils to see it.

The prospects of an inner beauty opens up a different horizon of beauty altogether, namely, that all outward beauty reveals an inner beauty that leads to God for "all things are marks of His power, rays of His knowledge, astounding testimonies of His wisdom, and reflections of His beauty. . . . Nothing besides Him has real existence, because the existence of all things is only the reflection of the light of His existence." This is the meaning, for Ghazali, of the Prophetic tradition "God is beautiful and He loves beauty", for "He must by necessity be loved by him to whom His beauty and majesty is revealed".

The implications for the horizon of one's spiritual vision are enormous. For Ghazali, under the right conditions, sight is not restricted to the sensible plane, even though it constitutes its point of departure. Eyesight (*basar*) is a prelude for *insight* (*basira*) and eventually vision (*ru'ya*) of God. Therefore, perception of beauty is a mode of a remembrance of God and requires a special mode of being. The crucial factor in the perception of beauty is to *be* beautiful (*ibsan*).

Though equally occupied with the question of love and beauty, the Hanbali school was overwhelmingly concerned with the ethical implications of beauty.<sup>46</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi's *Dhamm al-hawa* is one of the earliest accounts of this concern. According to al-Jawzi's account of the psychological make-up of man, man is torn between reason (*ʿaql*) and passion (*hawwa*). While the necessary role that the sensual passions play in life must not be censured absolutely, they must be reined in when they exceed the bounds set for them by the Law. Ibn al-Jawzi's extremely wary attitude towards the passions is Qur'anic: "And he follows his low desires (*hawwahu*) and his case exceeds due bounds" (18:28). It is also found in hadith: "There is no god under heaven more odious to Allah than a man's passion when he has yielded to it", and the Qur'anic verse "Hast thou considered him who takes his lusts (*hawwahu*) for his god" (45:23). Therefore, passion is often associated with that which is blameworthy as Ibn ʿAbbas is reported to have said: "Nowhere did God mention *hawwa* in His Book without blaming it."<sup>47</sup>

How is passion ignited? Here lies the crux of the argument. It all begins with the gaze (*nazar*). The faculty of vision is the means by which the flames of passion are ignited and which is why the Qur'an and the Law prescribe that it be restrained: "Say to the believers that they cast down their eyes" (24:30). Ibn al-Jawzi quotes the famous address of the Prophet to ʿAli: "Do not follow up the first glance with another; the first is permitted to you, but not the second." Again using the analogy of an arrow: "ʿAli, beware the second glance, for it is a poisoned arrow which stirs up desire in the heart." The second glance was later prohibited by Islamic law. Satan embellishes (*yuzayyimu*) what is not intrinsically beautiful. Recall what we said earlier about the *zina* in the Qur'an.<sup>48</sup>

Ibn al-Jawzi's strictures against the gaze were primarily directed at the Sufis who engaged in the contemplation of objects, women, and beardless youth, a practice Ibn al-Jawzi considered idolatrous.<sup>49</sup> For

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Norment Bell has done the remarkable job of documenting them in his *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1979), focusing on: Abu al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597/1200), Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), the latter's student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), and Mar'i ibn Yusuf al-Karmi (d. 1033/1624). Their work constitutes an important source of our knowledge of the widespread Islamic concern with the dangers of beauty and the gaze. I will look at Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya as representative examples.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *Dhamm al-hawa*, ed. Mustafa ʿAbd al-Wahid (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha, 1381/1962), 12–13; Bell, *Love Theory*, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *Dhamm al-hawa*, 86; Bell, *Love Theory*, 19–20.

<sup>49</sup> Ghazali himself equally condemned the gazing at beardless youth with sexual desire, as do most Sufis.

al-Jawzi the practice of gazing at women, beardless youth, or beautiful objects was a corollary of the doctrine of *bulul*. Ibn al-Jawzi took the Sufi belief in the beatific vision in this world through the faculty of sight as a blasphemous doctrine imported into Islam. Here we have more than just a moral rejection but a theological one too, aimed at the Sufi practice of gazing at physical beauty and its corresponding theories of love, particularly passionate love (*ishq*). The primary cause of passionate love, for Ibn al-Jawzi, is gazing (*nazar*), but it is not just the single glance but rather persistent gazing.

Ibn al-Jawzi does not reject love, for it is an inclination towards the beautiful and the suitable, but “*ishq* which exceeds the limit of mere inclination and [normal] love and by possessing the reason causes its victim to act unwisely, is blameworthy, and out to be avoided by the prudent”.<sup>50</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi then goes on to recount the stories illustrating the disasters that come to those who give themselves over to this type of love.

Following Ghazali before him, Ibn Qayyim likewise identifies beauty as one of the causes of love.<sup>51</sup> But he writes not just as a moralizer but rather “to aid believers in properly subordinating all secondary affections to the supreme love owed to God”. For love is the means, final cause of creation, and the soul’s path to beatitude.<sup>52</sup> Ibn Qayyim is primarily interested in mobilizing all human emotions to this noble end. Though Ibn Qayyim extols the virtues of beauty and love as a path towards God, he insists that physical beauty can ravish the heart and lead it away from God. He often speaks of the addiction of the gaze (*idman al-nazar*). The eye is the mirror of the heart and so it can lead to tarnishing it. Like Ibn al-Jawzi, Ibn Qayyim identifies gazing as the cause of profane love. The gaze, of course, is followed by admiration (*istibsan*), contemplation of the object seen (*al-fikr fi al-manzur*), and a desire to possess it (*tama*).<sup>53</sup> Gazing takes up most of Ibn Qayyim’s discussion and follows a similar structure to that of Ibn al-Jawzi. He unequivocally condemns it leveling critique after critique at those who adduce evidence in support of it, particularly the Sufis whom he accuses of elevating the love of bodily forms (*ishq al-surwar*) to the status of a religion under the pretense that it brings them closer to God.<sup>54</sup>

Although Ibn Qayyim does admit that divine beauty may be inferred from the sight of earthly beauty, the degree of love for God is dependent not on an aesthetic contemplation of nature but rather on the degree of knowledge of divine beauty revealed in the sacred texts and the divine attributes. The most complete knowledge of the divine beauty comes from the Qur’an and Sunna. These are the only guarantee against antinomianism of which he accused the Sufis.

These two accounts of the nature of visual perception reflect a common underlying concern with our visual capacities. The theological differences between the Hanbali school and the Sufis only meant that their ethical strictures were different but not their concern with the possible dangers of beauty. They both acknowledged that beauty could be a snare for the would-be initiand and developed a rigorous ascetic literature for the purification of the gaze, the self, and the heart, but it was the Sufi philosophical and theological doctrine of worldly beauty, as a manifestation of Divine Beauty, that was problematic for many *fuqaha*’ and the Hanbali school. As stated earlier, the gaze became a common trope in Islamic culture and the means of purifying it became of central concern.

<sup>50</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *Dhamm al-hawa*, 306; Bell, *Love Theory*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Ibn al-Jawzi, *Dhamm al-hawa*, 86; Bell, *Love Theory*, 122. In Ibn al-Qayyim’s writings we find the most elaborate treatment of love, beauty, and the gaze in the Hanbali tradition. He was influenced by both the theology of Ibn Taymiyya, *fiqh*, and the writings of Ibn al-Jawzi, which show a clear influence on his *Rawdat al-mubibbin*, Ibn Qayyim’s most comprehensive account on sacred and profane love. Although he gives it such importance, he does not show any sophisticated understanding of its nuances nor does he avail himself of the stock of classical notions of beauty available within the Islamic tradition before him. He rejects the Platonic doctrine that man may progress through a hierarchy of stages to the ultimate apprehension of supreme beauty, which had influenced al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ghazali, and Ibn<sup>c</sup> Arabi before him.

<sup>52</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Rawdat al-mubibbin*, 1; Bell, *Love Theory*, 99.

<sup>53</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Rawdat al-mubibbin*, 88–9; Bell, *Love Theory*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Bell, *Love Theory*, 142.

The Islamic gaze is rooted in the Prophetic practice of *Ihsan*. *Ihsan* comes from the Arabic *husn*, which means both goodness and beauty. Without beautifying one's interior, one cannot perceive the beauty of God, the supreme goal of which is to gaze upon the face of God, if only through a veil. The beauty of this world is a pre-figuration of the Beatific Vision. The true aesthetic experience of beauty, then, is to move from the physical appearance of things, drawn by the power of love evinced by beauty, and rise above them to the supreme Light and Beauty of God. One contemporary scholar puts it succinctly when he states that the danger is that

the experience of beauty becomes a substitute for God, rather than a pathway to Him; it generates *ghafla*, a forgetfulness of God, rather than a *dhikr*, a remembrance of God; it gives rise to an unstable, false and fleeting plenitude which inflates the ego, rather than to a contemplation of the transcendent essences of beauty in the face of which the hardness of the ego is dissolved, and the limitations and pretensions of the ego are transcended.<sup>55</sup>

While our perceptual and visual capacities deserve an entire monograph of their own, the question of *nazar* itself shows how a broader understanding of aesthetics can do justice to a theory of beauty that is at once a theory of being as it is a praxis or *phronesis*. A profoundly ethical philosophy, then, is implied in the Islamic *visio Dei*. The vision of the beauty of God results from living the virtuous or beautiful life. Indeed, both Ghazali and Ibn Qayyim describe the practice of virtue and piety as adorning the soul.<sup>56</sup>

The modest or humble eye is perhaps one way of describing the Islamic gaze. Recent scholarship on the gaze has only vindicated this "Islamic" concern. Beyond a merely negative and legalistic view, one can situate this Islamic concern within a symbolic cultural perspective of its own rather than subject it to Western ocularcentrism. Of particular interest in contemporary philosophy is the growing critique of ocularcentrism, namely, the hegemony of vision as metaphor in the history of the West.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps it is this Western obsession with vision in the past few centuries that has stalled a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the Islamic gaze and its deeper relationship in Islamic culture to our perceptual capacities of hearing (*sama'*)<sup>58</sup> and the body.<sup>59</sup>

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Is the term "aesthetics" a useful one in the context of studying classical Islamic thought? What has emerged from our heuristic exploration of aesthetics or *'ilm al-jamal* and beauty in classical Islamic thought is a much wider and more comprehensive notion of aesthetics than is commonly understood today. It is important to bear in mind that classical Islamic thought invested beauty with various meanings, coached in several discourses, which led to the development of several Islamic aesthetic sensibilities. Classical Islamic thought not only managed to reconcile the aesthetic enjoyment of beauty with the suspicion of sensuous attraction, but ultimately also found a significant place for its pursuit in spiritual life.

<sup>55</sup> Reza-Shah Kazemi, "Divine Beatitude: Supreme Archetype of Aesthetic Experience", in *Seeing God Everywhere*, ed. Barry McDonald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 216.

<sup>56</sup> al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, 10 vols. (Jeddah: Dar al-Minhaj, 1432/2011), "Book of Love"; see the translation of this book of the *Ihya'* in Eric L. Ormsby, *Al-Ghazali on Love, Longing, Intimacy & Contentment* (Cambridge: Islamic Text Society, 2012); see also Ibn Qayyim, *Madarij al-salikin*.

<sup>57</sup> David Michael Levin, ed., *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>58</sup> The relationship between our perceptual capacities in the act of being beautiful (*ihsan*) is best exemplified in the ritual prayer and articulated in the well-known hadith of *Ihsan*. After inquiring about the meaning of faith and belief, Gabriel asks the Prophet: "What is 'being beautiful' (*ihsan*)?" to which the Prophet replies: "To worship God *as if* you see Him, and if you don't see Him, He sees you." The hadith contains all the lineaments of an Islamic aesthetics: purification, worship, beauty, imagination, and vision. The question of the gaze leads naturally to the question of the Islamic veil, an infinitely rich and understudied field of inquiry that raises new insights into the nature of the image in Islam and a whole host of issues that demand serious scholarly attention. Tim Winter has already alluded to the possible relation between the Islamic understanding of the veil and aniconism and possible points of dialogue with Lacan's psychoanalysis in his "The Chador of God".

<sup>59</sup> See Mahmoud, "Idols, Icons, & As-If Images".

To those who share their theological or metaphysical basis, such as contemporary *mutakallimun*, their thought is highly instructive and can suggest ways of engaging with the contemporary world and the critics of theology. To those who are more naturalistic in their orientation and philosophical enterprise, these medieval ruminations pose a serious challenge. For though they show what kind of case can be made for beauty and aesthetics on the basis of religion (theological and metaphysical speculation), they also imply that if the case cannot be made, beauty would be a dreadful evil. What sort of reply can those who approach beauty and aesthetics with very different premises make? The eschewing of questions of ethics, truth, and beauty in contemporary aesthetics is very challenging. However, the growing global interest in cross-cultural philosophical and aesthetic traditions, in general, and the burgeoning new field of “Islamic aesthetics”, in particular, is bringing these themes back to the foreground of contemporary aesthetic discussions and this is a very promising development.