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Metaphysics of Beauty in Islam*

Abstract: I summarize fundamental philosophical principles of the metaphysics of beauty in Arabic, Persian and Turkish thought, literature and culture, beginning with the Quran and hadith. As in Plato, true beauty is thought of as the destination of a journey of inner development, but through a distinctively Islamic series of “worlds.” With examples from literature and painting I show how Islamic philosophy elaborated the key role of imagination in realization of true beauty.

Keywords: beauty, Plato, Islam, metaphysics, ancient philosophy, Islamic philosophy

Beauty in Islam

The metaphysics of beauty in Islam is deeply rooted in the antique. The Quran revealed to Muhammed of Mecca between 610 and 632, and the hadith, that is, accounts of what Muhammed said and did, bear content we can recognize as Platonic, especially with regard to beauty in the sense Plato used the term *to kalòn* and its cognates to mean *both goodness and beauty*. During the Greek to Arabic Translation Movement 750–1000, *kalòn* was most often rendered as *husn* or *jamâl*,¹ terms interchangeable in the Quran and hadith. Beauty in this sense is one of the main subjects of the Quran; *husn* and its cognates occur almost 200 times in the text.² Persian *nîkū'î* and Turkish *güzellik* bear the Platonic meaning also, and the antonyms of all three signify shamefulness and repulsiveness as well as ugliness, as do those of *kalòn*.

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¹ Glossarium Graeco-Arabicum, <http://telota.bbaw.de/glossga/> (accessed 13.04.2022).

² K. Murata, *Beauty in Sufism: The Teachings of Ruzbihan Baqli*, Albany 2017, p. 30.

Beauty in this sense has ontological and epistemological meaning implicit in love as desire (Greek *eros*, Arabic *'ishq*). Beauty is defined as that which is desired; beauty exists in degrees according to its nearness to its origin, degrees which require that love develop in specific ways in order to reach it; beauty is known by way of love. Love may begin as lust, but can move a person to discover beauty “in itself,” beyond the grasp of the senses. Diotima’s staircase of love, described by Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*, shines in the structure of countless works, including narratives of Muhammed’s *mi‘râj*, in all languages wherever Islamic culture spread, in works by Jews and Christians as well, carrying the meanings of Quranic vocabulary with it.

As far as we know now, there is no single figure who decisively founded an Islamic metaphysics of beauty serving as a reference point for all who came after, as the towering Ibn Sina (Latin Avicenna; 980–1037) did for other subjects. The metaphysics of beauty is rather the sum of allusive patterns said to be prefigured in the Quran and hadith and elaborated in countless works of many kinds, verse and prose (and visual arts, architecture, music, dance and crafts), some by philosophers better known for their rational writings, like Ibn Sina, who wrote in his *Treatise on Love* that although people love the beauty of exterior form, “the real and final aim of all love is [...] the beauty of the spiritual world.”³ Authors of such works have found God to be identified with beauty, or love, or with being, or Ibn Sina’s “necessary existent” (*wâjib al-wujûd*). As Parviz Morewedge has pointed out, the course of such arguments arrives at a gap not bridged by logical demonstration.⁴ Henry Corbin called Ibn Sina’s tales “visionary recitals.”⁵ Peter Adamson has explained why “proving the existence of a necessary existent is different from proving the existence of God.”⁶ The absence of explicit statement in these works is intentional; as with psychoanalytic practice, the aim is to cultivate insight rather than to explain.

Two well-known hadiths indicate how beauty was understood by Muhammed. In the first, Muhammed says, “No one who has a dust mote’s weight of arrogance in his heart will enter paradise.” His interlocutor rejoins, “A man likes his garment and sandals to be beautiful.” Muhammed goes on to clarify the difference between arrogance and fondness for beautiful things: “Indeed, God is beautiful, and He loves beauty. Arrogance is to be insolent toward God and to despise people.”⁷ Here is one example of the prefiguring I mentioned: the implied continuity between the beauty of a sandal and the beauty of God.

The second example, a “sacred hadith,” in which Muhammed quoted God, establishes the continuity by linking beauty, love, and knowledge: “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the creatures that I might be

³ E.L. Fackenheim, “A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sina, Translated,” *Mediaeval Studies* 7 (1945), p. 210.

⁴ P. Morewedge, *The Mystical Philosophy of Avicenna*, Binghamton 2001, pp. 10–16.

⁵ H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, transl. W.R. Trask, New York 1960.

⁶ P. Adamson, “From the Necessary Existent to God,” [in:] *Interpreting Avicenna*, P. Adamson (ed.), Cambridge 2013, p. 170.

⁷ K. Murata, *Beauty in Sufism*, pp. 33–34.

known.”⁸ Here is a familiar monotheistic pattern: subject, act, and object of the act are one. Before God created the world, He was a treasure — and a treasure is by definition beautiful and good. A vast interpretive tradition has it that God generates in and from His beauty because He loves to be known and loved through His creatures’ love of the things He engenders. All beauty originates in God’s beauty; by preceding creation, beauty is assigned a certain ontological priority and God is known through love of beauty. Ahmad Ghazali (1061–1126; not to be confused with his older brother Abu Hamid) described an ontology of love in which love is the divine essence in love with its own beauty, which is the sum of its perfections. Spirit travels “the arc of descent” (or “outward track”) as love’s beloved. When spirit hears “the call,” it turns to face love, and travels back along “the arc of ascent” (“inward track”) as the lover, while love is the beloved.⁹

Metaphysics of Beauty

The status of form and imagery is crucial to the metaphysics of beauty. A treasure is also by definition hidden, in Quranic terms in the *ghayb*, usually translated as the “Unseen.” The Quran begins: “Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds,” (1:1) pointing to the plurality of worlds; it is “guidance for those who believe in the Unseen” (2:1). The *ghayb* is a world not only not seen but not heard, not touched, etc., not grasped by the senses. Corbin coined the term *mundus imaginalis* for an intermediate world that links the spiritual with the material and is accessed by the faculty of imagination: the Imaginal World he found described by Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi (1154–1191), Ibn Arabi (1165–1240),¹⁰ and many others. To clear up a growing misunderstanding, *mundus imaginalis* does not correspond to any notion articulated in antique Latin; it is the coinage of Henry Corbin, a 20th-century French phenomenologist well-schooled in Latin, to translate Arabic and Persian ‘*alam al-mithâl* (also ‘*alam al-malakût*, ‘*alam al-khayâl*;¹¹ all three usages are present in Turkish and other languages as well).

The imaginal forms populating that realm have been treated variously; in the few pages allotted here I may say that imaginal form is a state of existence in between “meaning” (*ma’nâ*) in God’s knowledge and embodiment in corporeal

⁸ W.C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Cosmology*, Albany 1998, p. 21.

⁹ N. Pourjavady, “Ma’nâ-yi husn va ‘ishq dar adabiyat-i Farsi,” *Sophia Perennis* 2 [1] (Spring 1976), treated in V.R. Holbrook, *The Unreadable Shores of Love: Turkish Modernity and Mystic Romance*, Austin 1994, pp. 143–146.

¹⁰ The *Stanford Encyclopedia* articles on Suhrawardi and on Ibn Arabi are excellent summaries with up-to-date bibliography: R. Marcotte, “Suhrawardi,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/suhrawardi/> (accessed 13.04.2022); W. Chittick, “Ibn ‘Arabi,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/ibn-arabi/> (accessed 13.04.2022).

¹¹ H. Corbin, “*Mundus Imaginalis* or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” *Les Amis de Henry et Stella Corbin*, <https://www.amiscorbin.com/bibliographie/mundus-imaginalis-or-the-imaginary-and-the-imaginal/> (accessed 13.04.2022).

form. Meaning, imaginal, and embodied states are an ontological series subsisting simultaneously. Before God created, the things He would create were “entities” (*‘ayn*) in His knowledge. Through creation, these entities first acquire imaginal, then corporeal form. But after acquiring corporeal form, we continue to subsist as entities and imaginal forms as well. When we die, we shed corporeality and return to our imaginal forms to await Resurrection Day, but it is also possible to access the imaginal realm before death. The position of the imaginal realm corresponds to that of the soul between spirit and body. The perceptual faculties are located in the soul, and thus the forms one apprehends through imagination may be distorted by the state of one’s soul.

Wendy M.K. Shaw has explained that the insistence of modern art historians upon an Islamic prohibition against images provides no account for their ever-present role in Islamic philosophy and artistic culture of all kinds. Images are celebrated for their beauty, but understood as *insufficient* to represent reality, because the “worlds” of reality are many and vary in degrees of reality, as are the conditions of the individual human faculties apprehending them. While the aesthetics developed in Christian contexts favours the visual, the Islamic is a “perceptual culture” that prioritizes sound while addressing all the faculties. Imaginal forms, including the contents of dreams, are apperceived not only by the sense of sight but hearing, smell, taste and touch. Where the Christian miracle is the embodied God, the Islamic miracle is the aural revelation of the Quran (“recitation”). God creates by speaking (Quran 2:117).¹² God’s speech conveys unseen meanings to the embodied world by means of imaginal forms, and the return journey to meaning leads back through imaginal form.

Beauty and Love

At the end of his Persian *Spiritual Couplets (Mathnawī)*, Mevlana Rumi (1207–1273) reinterpreted an old tale of three princes who come upon a Fortress of Forms full of images so beautiful that the princes lose their minds.¹³ The word “form,” *ṣūra*, was used during the Translation Movement to render *eidōs*,¹⁴ and has the meaning of imaginal as well as intelligible form. Like intelligible forms, the images in Rumi’s tale are not perceived by the five senses, although as non-corporeal images accessed by imagination, they are “seen.” The most beautiful of all the images there is of a Chinese princess. The three princes fall in love with her and set off to win her hand. Rumi described the failures of the first two, while of the third he said only: “And the third was the laziest of the three / He carried away all — both form and meaning” (6:4876),¹⁵ explaining that those who know God are the laziest of people because they rely upon God to work for them, while others rely upon their own efforts.

¹² These are fundamental points reiterated throughout W.M.K. Shaw, *What Is “Islamic” Art?*, Cambridge 2019.

¹³ R.A. Nicholson (ed., transl., intro, commentary), *The Mathnawī of Jalālūddīn Rūmī*, 8 vols., London 1925–1940, vol. 6, verses 3583–end.

¹⁴ Glossarium Graeco-Arabicum, <http://telota.bbaw.de/glossga/> (accessed 13.04.2022).

¹⁵ My translation.

The story of the third prince was retold by Galip (1757–1799), Şeyh (director) of the Galata Mevlevi Cloister in Istanbul (order of Mevlana Rumi), with his Turkish verse romance *Beauty and Love*.¹⁶ The second half relates the “return journey” of Galip’s hero Love, who is instructed to obtain the alchemy that is the bride-price for marriage with the heroine Beauty. He immediately falls into a bottomless well, where he is imprisoned by a demon who wants to eat him; a witch demands he marry her and crucifies him when he refuses; he traverses a sea of fire (after declining offers to board ships of wax), and on the farther shore, beyond the trials of gluttony and lust, is lured into the Fortress of Forms by a Chinese princess who looks exactly like Beauty. Love is bewildered by the two-dimensional pictures she has painted: “The forms there from matter were disengaged / Presenting themselves uniquely half-faced” (1832). The princess intends to murder him, and he burns the Fortress down, becoming now as insubstantial as thought: “Without matter he was but a mere form / Significance rare without letter borne” (1902). He reaches the Land of the Heart and is greeted by the Sacred Spirit, who tells him he has always been here: “For Love is but Beauty, and Beauty, Love” (2059). Love has journeyed through his own maturing imagination, through the elements of earth, water, fire and air, confronted by distorted imaginal forms of his own (Aristotelian) vegetal, animal, and intellectual souls as he traverses the worlds of embodiment and imagination to arrive at the world of meaning. There the story ends: “Speech has to the realm of silence arrived” (2069). All things are made of God’s speech; they emerge from the “Unseen” realm of meaning, acquire imaginal, then corporal form, and return the way they came.

I will end with reference to a miniature painting treated by Shaw.¹⁷ We see Plato surrounded by animals his music has made to fall into a deep sleep.¹⁸ If he can make animal souls sleep, he can make them wake; he can make them do anything he wishes. The painting illustrates a story from *Iskandarnama*, one of five books in the Persian *Khamsa* of Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), with a passage calligraphed in the miniature. At a gathering at the court of Alexander the Great, Aristotle declares that he has opened the path to all knowledge. Plato withdraws to sit in an empty wine cask and meditate on the night sky. He listens to the sublime music of the spheres, constructs an organ based on its intervals, and plays the music, with the effects shown in the painting. Plato demonstrates that his mastery surpasses Aristotle’s; he shows that he can, by means of beautiful sound, convey philosophy, which originates in the Unseen, to the soul in the world of embodiment.

Attributed to Madhu Khanazad, the painting was done in the Mughal Empire in India during the last decade of the 16th century, the early years of European penetration there. Khanazad introduced elements not found in Nizami’s book. The panels in the altarpiece placed on top of Plato’s organ depict Europeans in scenes familiar in Islamic lore, painted with Western-style perspective, which is not employed in the rest of the miniature. He shows us that Europeans, and the

¹⁶ Şeyh Galip, *Beauty and Love/Hüsn-ü Aşk*, transl. V.R. Holbrook, 2 vols., New York 2005.

¹⁷ W.M.K. Shaw, *What Is “Islamic” Art?*, p. 79 ff.

¹⁸ See “B20004-51,” British Library, <https://imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/1355/> (accessed 13.04.2022).

perspective technique in their altarpieces, can be domesticated and mastered by the beauty of Plato's philosophy, all the more powerful for being Unseen.

Nader El-Bizri, like his teacher Morewedge, has pointed to commonalities between Avicennian metaphysics and phenomenology. Having begun with the Islamic approach to imagery as "insufficient," we may recall Martin Heidegger's warning to our age of the "World-Picture," the perspective-based, mechanical image of the world our science has helped us to produce, and which has moved us to destroy the natural world.¹⁹ The point made by both is that if we allow ourselves to be duped by insufficient representations of beauty, we will fail to realize our human being.

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¹⁹ K. Harries, *Philosophy of Architecture: Lecture Notes*, Yale University Fall Semester 2016, <https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/8/1250/files/2012/09/Philosophy-of-Architecture-1wsooyk.pdf> (accessed 13.04.2022), pp. 42–54.

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