

**STUDIA ORIENTALIA**

**111**



**STUDIA  
ORIENTALIA  
VOLUME 111**

*Published by the Finnish Oriental Society*



Helsinki 2011

**Studia Orientalia, vol. 111, 2011**

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Societas Orientalis Fennica  
c/o Department of World Cultures  
P.O. Box 59 (Unioninkatu 38 B)  
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FINLAND

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Lotta Aunio

ISSN 0039-3282  
ISBN 978-951-9380-79-7

WS Bookwell Oy  
Jyväskylä 2011

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# THE GOOD, THE BEAUTIFUL, AND THE TRUE AESTHETICAL ISSUES IN ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

*Taneli Kukkonen*

## 1. AESTHETICS IN ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY?

“Islamic aesthetics” is something of a tricky designation when approached from a philosopher’s point of view, or for that matter a historian’s.<sup>1</sup> Without a doubt, many of the Muslim philosophers wrote on topics which a modern student of aesthetics would find of interest. Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī’s (d. 950) forays into music are well known, for instance; Ibn Ṭufayl’s (d. 1185) less so, although we know that he, too, fancied himself a musicologist.<sup>2</sup> The long-standing tradition of commenting on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, meanwhile, meant that a sizeable body of work formed around the question of what constitutes pleasing, effective, and persuasive speech. Most pertinently for our present purposes, we have a series of rich philosophical discussions surrounding the use of the sense organs and the way in which pleasure figures in both sensory and intellectual cognition. These frequently incorporate at least some comments on the part of the Arabic philosophers regarding the aesthetic aspect of human experience, especially when it comes to the superior joys that occur when one comes face to face with the divine. I shall examine one such meditation in the principal part of this study.

At the same time, one may question whether “aesthetics” really is the most useful or appropriate banner under which to discuss these materials, at least when it comes to Arabic philosophy proper. *Falsafa*, after all, according to the traditional understanding of the word, constitutes a body of systematic scientific inquiry and teaching building directly upon the Aristotelian tradition as it was understood in late antiquity. Insofar as it lived up to this self-proclaimed ideal, it proved a less than congenial environment for aesthetic exploration in the philosophical sense, for a couple of reasons.

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1 The first version of this paper was presented at the symposium Islamic aesthetics, organized jointly by The Finnish Society for Aesthetics and The Finnish Oriental Society 27–28 October 2008.

2 According to the report of al-Marrākushī (d. 1270), Ibn Ṭufayl boasted that if music – by which the science of music must be meant – had not existed in al-Andalus during his time he would have had to invent it himself (see al-Marrākushī 1881: 172).

First and most importantly, one has to recognize that nothing like modern aesthetics as a separate sub-discipline of philosophy had a place in the Muslim philosophers' own understanding of the philosophical enterprise. Aesthetics in this sense simply did not exist for them. For a philosophical aesthetics to develop in this sense of the word, one would have to hold distinctly modern views on what constitutes a work of art and how it is appreciated, as well as have in mind a division of the sciences and of academic disciplines that reflects a post-Kantian understanding of the academic field rather than an Aristotelian one. Aristotelian philosophy presents a rather different picture of the types of philosophical inquiry from what we find in Kant's three famous critiques: instead of Kant's pure and practical reason followed by a critique of judgement – ground zero for philosophical discussions on the nature of beauty in the modern era – Aristotle distinguishes between the theoretical, practical, and productive arts. Similarities on the surface level notwithstanding, this is plainly not the same thing. Consequently, if one is to analyze, for example, the Arabic commentary tradition on Aristotle's *Poetics* in a non-anachronistic manner, one had better check at the door any modern preconceptions of what constitutes a philosophical inquiry into the nature of affective or effective speech.<sup>3</sup>

Second – and perhaps this is a rather obvious point – the major Muslim philosophers would never have thought that there is any sense in speaking about a localized “Islamic” aesthetics. Rather, whatever philosophical aesthetics there may be, must by its very nature be universal in character.<sup>4</sup> This is because Arabic Aristotelians in their pursuit of wisdom were driven by the conviction that any true knowledge and science worthy of the name concerns “that which cannot be otherwise” and that which everywhere and always stays the same. This universalist ideal is presented programmatically in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, while its implications are discussed in detail by the Arabic Peripatetic philosophers in their commentaries.<sup>5</sup>

Notice in this connection how in Aristotle's *Poetics* the significance of this doctrine for one traditional arena of artistic endeavour, namely drama, is spelled out. In the context of the *Poetics* Aristotle (1451a36–1451b11) says that history

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3 On this point I follow John Marenbon's similar cautionary note concerning the postulation and consequent scholarly exploration of a medieval (which is to say Latin and Christian) aesthetics.

4 An example of a modern scholar following the lead of the Muslim *falāsifa* on this point is Leaman (2004); for contrast, compare Nasr (1987), who pursues the essentialist line according to which there is a specific character and indeed philosophy to Islamic art.

5 For the Arabic commentary tradition on the *Posterior Analytics*, see Marmura 1990; for its overwhelming significance for the Arabic philosophical tradition starting with Fārābī, see, e.g. Black 2006, and on a more general level Maróth 1994.



deals with empirical occurrences – things that have actually happened – but is only concerned with the ephemeral and the particular and therefore bears no real connection to wisdom. The poet, by contrast, fabricates verses to describe fabricated happenings – things that never were – but does so in order to convey some universal lesson, to highlight something about the world that is not only true but probable or even necessary. “Pride goes before the fall” would be one such general lesson, engraved in the text and texture of countless Greek myths (indeed, myths the world over) and the tragedies crafted on their basis.

The lesson the medieval Arabic commentators took away from this was that whatever else valuable and cogent might be said about the aesthetic aspect of human experience and artifice (the recipient’s and craftsman’s approaches to art, respectively), minimally it would have to hold true for all people at all times. Both Avicenna and Averroes distort this lesson in order to press the very un-Aristotelian point that the best poet is not content with the construction of fabrications, but instead must deal with truthful statements.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the central lesson still stands: there is an *art* to art, it is not only a matter of experience, and the fact that the former can be taught is explained by the fact that the latter is at least in some sense universal. (Aristotle, *Met.* 1.1, 981a13–b12) For the Arabic Aristotelians this teaching had the additional, and entirely welcome, consequence of granting justification to the importation into an Arabic milieu of Greek philosophical teaching, and of resisting nativist claims according to which Arabic forms of expression can only be understood and judged by native Arabs and/or scholars of the traditional Islamic sciences.<sup>7</sup>

Now, it has often been said that the Arabic philosophers misunderstood quite dramatically the intent of the *Poetics* as well as that of Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric*. (Borges’s short story “Averroës’s Search” provides perhaps the best-known illustration of this.) Abstracting from the social context these two arts enjoyed in ancient Athenian society – something they had no access to and could not be expected to have known about – the Arabic Aristotelians took home from individual statements made in the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* the lesson that both of these

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6 Arabic Aristotelianism did receive the original Alexandrian teaching according to which poetic statements are wholly false and entirely mythological; such is still the view, e.g. of al-Fārābī and Ibn Miskawayh (1917: 63 and 68). This doctrine was probably transmitted through the works of Paul the Persian (Gutas 1983: 242–243).

7 Not all native experts on Arabic poetry took this challenge lying down; see Heinrichs 1969. Instructive is the famed debate between the Aristotelian logician-philosopher Ibn Yūnus Abū Bishr Mattā (d. 940) and Sā’id al-Sīrāfi (d. 978): it is Abū Bishr Mattā’s inability to appreciate the singular nuances of literary Arabic, and his vainglorious claims as concerns the supposedly total nature of logic as a universal grammar, that earn him the audience’s ridicule. On the debate, see Endress 1986.

arts have to do essentially with persuasion, and that moreover this persuasion is of the argumentative sort. Following upon this, and in keeping with a custom already established in the late ancient school of Alexandria, rhetoric and poetics were classified with the logical arts and regarded as looser forms of reasoning suited for the public sphere or those of lesser intellectual talent. Rhetoric and poetics were thought to be concerned with bringing forth assent to propositions just as syllogistic was; and the familiar classes of singular, collective, and universal terms were thought to apply to them just as they applied to the terms of the syllogistic arts proper, leading to the application of predicate logic as a heuristic for discerning the patterns of rhetorical and poetic “syllogisms” (see Black 1991).

All of which is not to say that the aesthetic effect of poetic composition would have been lost on the Arabic Aristotelians. To the contrary, they had a great deal to say about the topic that was interesting, some of it even instructive. It is only that their approach to this phenomenon – the curious way in which poetry can move us and make us see the world in new ways – was rooted in the firm belief that there is something here to be *explained*, that is, that the inner workings of poetic expression and reception are subject to philosophical analysis in the same way that, say, the life of natural organisms and the relative perfection of political arrangements is.<sup>8</sup>

As for music, it is both interesting and important that Arabic philosophers discussed the essence and inner workings of this discipline under the heading of mathematics – that is to say between the study of nature and that of metaphysics –<sup>9</sup> while the practical effects of music were more typically addressed in the context of the medical art, for instance in connection with the treatment of melancholy.<sup>10</sup> The six-volume translation collection *La musique arabe*, handily available as a 2001 reprint (d’Erlanger et al. 2001), presents al-Fārābī’s and Avicenna’s most important contributions to the subject along with other texts. Al-Fārābī’s views became known to the Latin world through the remarks made in his many works regarding the division of the sciences.<sup>11</sup>

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8 See Kemal 2003; on the Greek – more specifically, Aristotelian – background to a philosophical poetics, see Oksenberg Rorty 1992.

9 The classification of the mathematical disciplines between natural philosophy and the study of the separate substances, based on Aristotle’s remarks in *Phys.* 2.2 and *Met.* 6.1, is found in systematized form already in the works of Nicolaus Damascenus (1969, §5), which were distributed in Syriac and likely also in Arabic.

10 For the late ancient background to this dual placement of music within the catalogue of sciences, see O’Meara 2005; Sheppard 2005.

11 See Farmer 1934. Al-Kindī’s earlier works on music, which similarly present music as a mathematical science, are collected in Zakariyya 1962; for a study, see Shehadi 1995.

These two examples should suffice to show how areas of human enterprise which we today are quick to mark out as art come under quite different, and diverging, analyses in the Muslim philosophers' works. The common background to these as well as, say, the visual arts, of course, is that they all fall under the heading of the productive arts (the Greek *tekhne* or the Arabic *sinā'a*), being skills that can be taught and arts that result in artefacts crafted and made by human hands. This marks them off as being concerned with works of art in a broad sense: but it does not make of their analysis a philosophical aesthetics in any modern sense of the word.

This need not be regarded solely as a negative point. One may find materials suited for aesthetical reflection in surprising places, and one may find one's own assumptions about aesthetical reflection beneficially challenged by such an encounter. In another article in this issue, Inka Nokso-Koivisto discusses Ibn al-Haytham's presentation of the experience of beauty in an optical context, as well as the aesthetic import of the microcosm-macrocosm metaphor found in the *Letters of the Brethren of Purity*. I wish to examine a different strand here, namely, the Islamic discussion concerning the so-called beautiful names of God (i.e. the divine attributes) and their apprehension by the religious aspirant, a process often described in vividly aesthetic, even sensuous terms.

## 2. GOD'S BEAUTIFUL NAMES

A useful point of departure is provided by Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's (1056–1111) study concerning *The highest summit in explaining the meaning of God's beautiful names* (*Al-maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ ma'ānī asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*) or more simply the *Beautiful Names*, as I shall take to calling this work. Given al-Ghazālī's proclaimed aim of elucidating the meaning of the divine names, it is all the more curious that it is never really explained in the work what it means for them to be beautiful. Still, in a comment on the notion of God's majesty al-Ghazālī comes fairly close to explaining his understanding of the origins of beauty and our experience of it:

When the attributes of majesty are related to the insight (*al-baṣīra*) that perceives them, this is called beauty, just as that which they describe is called beautiful. The name "beautiful" was originally posited for the evident, outward form (*al-ṣūra al-zāhira*) perceived by sight, in the sense that these are agreeable to the faculty of sight and fitted for it. Later it was said of the hidden, inward form (*al-ṣūra al-bāṭina*) that is perceived by insight so that one might say: "a pleasing, beautiful demeanour", as well as "a beautiful disposition". These are perceived by insight, not by sight. (al-Ghazālī 1982: 126)

The story sketched here is in keeping with what is put forward in the *Beautiful Names* as a general theory concerning the birth of language, namely, that concepts arise from common experience and that it is to such shared experiences that we give names in order to communicate them. This follows the example set forth by Aristotle in his treatise *On Interpretation*, and the emphasis on form merely confirms what al-Ghazālī says elsewhere: it is the formal features of reality which our cognitive powers are fit to receive. Consistent with Aristotle’s portrayal of sensation in *On the Soul* 2.12, upon apprehending some object we receive its form without the matter.<sup>12</sup>

For the phenomenon of beauty the upshot is this: the aesthetic experience at its heart is a natural response, having to do with certain actual properties that the universe possesses, rather than a learned or contrived calculation or invention.<sup>13</sup> In the *Beautiful Names* al-Ghazālī puts it that “everything that is beautiful is loved and desired (*maḥbūb wa-ma’shūq*) by one who perceives its beauty” (al-Ghazālī 1982: 127; likewise 2002: 4:265.18). This is an echo of Aristotle’s dictum according to which human beings take a sort of primal delight even in the use of their senses (*Met.* 1.1, 980a21–27). The line of explanation allows for an analysis of aesthetic pleasure which takes its beginning in some biological or metaphysical facts about human existence – for Aristotle, in the principle that “all men by nature desire to know”, or for al-Ghazālī in the notion that whatever human beings may find lovely in earthly existence really reflects the origin of both the human self and these beautiful things in the primary reality of the divine attributes. Such explanatory schemes aid in establishing the universal appeal of certain sensory objects and thus do useful work in laying the groundwork for a “science” of aesthetic experience, along the lines of what was described in the first section of this essay.

In the *Beautiful Names*, we only get the barest inklings of what al-Ghazālī’s vision for such a theory might be. Here, al-Ghazālī is content merely to note that in aesthetic experience some kind of relation (*nisba*) holds between the object apprehended and the faculty that does the apprehending. In al-Ghazālī’s principal work, the *Revivification of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*), this message is amplified and expanded on in important ways. The correlation (*munāsiba*) and conformity (*mushākila*) is now said to have its grounds in the subject resembling (*shabaha*) the object in some important respect (al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:267.26–27).

12 For the details of al-Ghazālī’s semantics, see Kukkonen 2010.

13 *Revivification of the Religious Sciences* underlines that the apprehension of beauty is a natural phenomenon, see al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:265.15–16.

This notion, grounded in the old Empedoclean principle of like knowing like,<sup>14</sup> is significant because when taken to its logical conclusion, it would mean that the human soul – the apprehending subject – would in some way contain in itself the likenesses of all those things which it can grow to love or consider beautiful. This reinforces the impression that it is the formal aspects or “realities” of things (*ḥaqāʾiq al-ashyāʾ*) that are cognized, for the particulars in the world are innumerable and hence unknowable. It also sets up a particular problem when it comes to the love of God, the principal subject of the 36th book of the *Revivification* as a whole. (For how could God be desired and loved, if God is unlike anything else?)

At this point these are still distant problems, however, for what becomes clear from the presentation given in the *Beautiful Names* is that all common terms are first coined in order to refer to everyday experiences and everyday objects and that it is only by extension that these are then transferred onto more abstract terrain. Hence, the concept of beauty first arises through sensory experience and only then receives application in more incorporeal contexts. Curious here is al-Ghazālī’s choice of example when describing how the transference occurs. Instead of focussing on entirely abstract features of the natural world that would exhibit, say, mathematical proportion – a seemingly obvious path to follow – al-Ghazālī picks an example from our moral life and our moral intuitions, saying that it is our ability to discern moral character that shows how experiencing beauty is not limited merely to sensory cognition.<sup>15</sup> There is a close comparison to this in Plotinus (*Enn.* 1.6.5), who proceeds in exactly the same order: sensory beauty is followed by beauty of character, which again is followed by forms of beauty entirely divorced from material concerns.<sup>16</sup> All desire for beauty ultimately culminates in the love of the divine:

A perfect and proportionate inward form which combines all its perfections in an appropriate manner, as is required and in accordance with what is required, is beautiful in relation to the inward insight that perceives it. Its suitability to this insight is of such a nature that in beholding it the perceiver will experience

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<sup>14</sup> Al-Daylamī, writing a century or so before al-Ghazālī, plainly states in his own treatise on divine love that one nature loves its like etc. See al-Daylamī (2005: 65–66); significantly, one variant has it that a nature rejoices (*tafraḥu*) in the nature that resembles it.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. also al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:262.3–18; on beautiful character (*khuluq ḥasan*) see the discussion in Sherif 1975: 29–31.

<sup>16</sup> The reason for this sequence, I believe, is that it ascends from nature to soul to intellect, thus reversing the unfolding of reality in the Plotinian metaphysical scheme (One–Intellect–Soul–nature). For al-Ghazālī there is an equivalent threefold scheme: there is God’s sensible kingdom or *al-mulk*, there is the intermediate realm of compulsion or *al-jabarūt* (which Kojiro Nakamura (1994) views in terms of the soul mediating between the sensible and the intelligible realms), and there is the world of the truly real, the immaterial and changeless *al-malakūt*.

far greater rapture, delight, and emotion (*ladhdha, bahja, ihtizāz*) than the one who apprehends (*nāzir*) the beautiful form with outward sight. And the truly and absolutely beautiful one is God alone, because all worldly beauty, perfection, splendour, and goodness is from the lights of His essence and the traces of His attributes (*anwār dhāti-hi wa-āthār šifāti-hi*). In existence there is no existent that would possess absolute perfection without peer except for Him alone – neither [in] existence, nor [in the realm of] possibility. For this reason, the one who knows Him and reflects upon His beauty experiences such delight, joy, rapture, and beatitude that he will disdain the pleasures of Paradise and the beauty of any sensible form. Indeed, there is no comparison between the beauty of the external form and the beauty of the inner meaning perceived by insight. (al-Ghazālī 1982: 126–127)

The perceptual analogy carries to the end, as the knowledge that pertains to the divine is of the experiential kind (*ma'rifa*), witnessed every bit as directly as the colour green or the sound of water: “God is beloved, but [only] by those who understand (*ind al-'ārifin*), just as outward beautiful forms are beloved, but [only] by those with eyesight, not by the blind” (al-Ghazālī 1982: 127). This love of God is the province of the science of revelation (*'ilm al-mukāshafa*), making of it at once the most central and the most mysterious of all of al-Ghazālī's concerns.

The picture al-Ghazālī paints of a hierarchy of cognitive pleasures ultimately goes back to Plato's *Symposium*. This means that his account of beauty, as it has been discussed thus far, is composed entirely out of classical Greek materials. There is Plato (the *Symposium*), there is Aristotle (*Met.* Alpha Meizōn), and there is Plotinus (*Enneads* 1.6, or the treatise *On Beauty*); and here there is a problem, for none of these *loci classici* are known to have been in wide circulation in Arabic translation. Plato's *Symposium* was never translated in its entirety and was known primarily for Aristophanes' jocular account of men and women having originally formed two halves of a single whole (see Gutas 1988); the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* was only translated in the late tenth century, with no direct references to its first four chapters discernible anywhere in the philosophical literature (Bertolacci 2005: 257–269); while of Plotinus' *Enneads* the Arabs had available to them heavily edited paraphrases, most of them under the name of Aristotle and all deriving from *Enneads* IV–VI (Adamson 2002).

The last gap is particularly puzzling, given that al-Ghazālī's *Book of Love and Longing* (otherwise known as *Revivification*, bk. 36), which contains al-Ghazālī's most extensive treatment of beauty, in places reads almost like a line-by-line restatement of Plotinian doctrine. Yet Plotinus' treatise *On Beauty* seems to have been known only to al-Kindī among all the Arabic philosophers, and to him only in the form of an epitome or summary, with none of the excerpts he uses addressing the question of beauty. Indeed, any mention of beauty in Kindī's

*Treatise on the Soul*, which constitutes our only testimony to Plotinus' treatise *On Beauty* being known at all, is conspicuously absent (Endress 2007: 331). This is understandable on the one hand, given that the paraphrasing and epitomizing sources with which al-Kindī worked will have wanted to plunder Plotinus' treatise for different sorts of insights, ones to do with the true home of the human soul in the intelligible realm. On the other, it leaves unsolved the riddle of how al-Ghazālī could have become acquainted with the Neoplatonic understanding of beauty in the first place, and in the second place come to claim it as his own.

Perhaps this does not matter altogether too much in the end. Whatever knowledge al-Ghazali had of the *Plotiniana Arabica* will have come to him partly through Avicenna anyway, and partly through the spiritual literature that was common to Islamic and Christian circles in the 'Abbasid era. Especially within the latter, there will certainly have been scope for the teaching of a broadly Neoplatonic doctrine of beauty and the beautiful, framed in the context of the longing that the divine inspires in the devout seeker of God. Instead of engaging in an attempt at tracking down a proximate source to al-Ghazālī's doctrine, I will in what remains of this essay content myself with making a few systematic remarks concerning al-Ghazālī's treatment of beauty in the *Book of Love and Longing*.

### 3. BEAUTY IN THE BOOK OF LOVE AND LONGING

In the *Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, beauty is discussed in association with al-Ghazālī's explanation of how love and longing (*ḥubb wa-'ishq*) function in the context of practical religion. Because of this, beauty as such occupies only a marginal position in the larger scheme of things. A fuller treatment of the *Book of Love and Longing* will consequently have to wait another occasion; but al-Ghazālī does have a few interesting things to say about beauty and the beautiful specifically, and it is to these passages that I now turn.

a. In talking about the love of God, al-Ghazālī's first task is to establish that some things are loved, desired, and enjoyed for their own sake, not for the sake of any external advantage or good they would confer upon their possessor. A paradigmatic case is provided by beauty (*jamāl wa-ḥusn*): "upon perceiving beauty, every beautiful [thing] is loved, and this precisely for the sake of its beauty" (al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:261.10–11). The very perception (*idrāk*) of beauty results in pleasure, and it is this pleasure that is loved. How else does one explain the delight we take in running water and green meadow, when there is no drive



to drink the water or eat the grass?<sup>17</sup> Our worries also dissipate and our sorrows lift when we get to observe colourful birds, blooms, and blossoms; this, too, according to al-Ghazālī points in the direction of the beautiful being a good in itself. In sum, nobody will deny that what is beautiful is beloved by nature (*al-jamāl mahbūb bi al-ṭabʿ*; al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:261.17).

b. There follows the familiar point about beauty being more than something appearing pleasing to the eye: people speak of beautiful handwriting, of somebody having a beautiful voice, of beautiful horses and beautiful vases (al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:261.23–27). The familiar example of character qualities is brought in to demonstrate that these cannot be reduced to the sensory attributes of things (al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:262.3 ff.). So what might unite all of these seemingly disparate phenomena? Al-Ghazālī says that fully accounting for the nature of beauty would turn into too lengthy an enterprise, given the parameters of the *Revivification* as a practical work in religion. Consequently, he says, he will forego discussion and go directly to the truth of the matter:

The beauty of each thing consists in the presence of the perfection proper to it and possible for it. Thus, when all the possible perfections are present, a thing is maximally beautiful, and if some of them are present [the thing] possesses beauty in accordance with what is present. Thus, a beautiful horse is one that brings together everything proper to a horse in terms of outward appearance, shape, colour, beautiful stride, and an easy back-and-forth; while every [instance of a] beautiful script combines what is proper to a script in relation to letters: their evenness and angle and beautiful ordering.  
(al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:261.28–31)

The emphasis on proportionality and proper measure is common to all Greek-derived aesthetics: both Plato and Aristotle profess essentially the same doctrine, and it is also found in the Stoic and Neoplatonic traditions.<sup>18</sup> Speaking of perfection (*kamāl*) as being pleasing to the observer is likewise consistent with the philosophical tradition as a whole. The only noticeable flourish al-Ghazālī adds merely serves to tilt the balance in a naturalistic – which is to say, Aristotelian – direction. Speaking of a horse’s gait and stride frames the question of aesthetic appreciation in a way that puts the onus on nature rather than artistic practice: the inner teleology of an object of appreciation has to do above all with the purpose-driven life of a given organism. Perfection consists in the actualization of the various potencies proper to a certain type of being; what those proper potencies

17 This example derives from a Prophetic tradition that is generally regarded as spurious.

18 On the latter, see Alexandrakis & Moutafakis 2002; Cheney & Hendrix 2004.



(rather, the activities stemming from them) are in turn defined according to the overall substantial form the thing in question has and the kind of life it leads. Of course, for al-Ghazālī this point can easily be overturned, given that for him everything found in nature from the highest to the lowest is a product of divine craftsmanship (and indeed it will; see Section 3d. below). But at this preliminary stage, it is worth noting that the forms al-Ghazālī wants to present as paradigm cases for beauty are of a natural, even organic character. It is to this organic unity that al-Ghazālī refers when he stipulates that the beauty of a thing is predicated indivisibly of the whole entity under investigation (al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:262.20): a horse is judged as a horse, a vase as a vase (or a tragedy as one complete tragedy, as Aristotle would add). It is the whole that has an aesthetic impact on the observer – as the sum of its parts, to be sure, but not only as the sum of its parts but as an entity whose parts are subservient to the whole.

c. Further in keeping with the Peripatetic tradition, al-Ghazālī resists the notion that a single notion of goodness or beauty would canvass all the instances of aesthetic judgement we come across. It is rather the case that there are as many distinct forms of beauty as there are substantial forms in the world:

For every [single] thing there is a perfection proper to it, while for another [thing] its opposite may be appropriate. The beauty of each thing accordingly consists in the perfection proper to it. The human being is not made beautiful by what makes the horse beautiful, nor is the script made beautiful by what makes a given voice beautiful; again pots are not made beautiful by what make clothes beautiful. The same goes for other things as well.

(al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:261.32–33)

Notice the limits to al-Ghazālī's pluralism. Notwithstanding the many different modes of perfection there are in the world, any given horse is still beautiful in exactly the same way as any other horse is, that is inasmuch as it conforms to the perfections proper to a horse. In analogous fashion, all pots are made beautiful by sharing in the shape, sturdiness, and the like characteristic of well-formed pots. This again flows directly from al-Ghazālī's belief in natural kinds or species (*naw'*), consistent with the Aristotelian tradition. It also helps to clarify one of the foggier aspects of al-Ghazālī's initial definition of beauty, namely, the equation of proportionality with beauty. For what might be termed beautiful and measured form in an animal – surely not merely some mathematical proportion? The answer in Aristotelian terms is that whatever best contributes to the specific form of life that a certain type of creature enjoys is conducive to the perfection of

that type of being. Consequently, a long snout will be judged a beautiful feature in an elephant or an anteater, but not necessarily in a human being.<sup>19</sup>

d. Further to the issue of natural kinds and kinds of perfection/beauty, al-Ghazālī has an interesting point to make which throws light on the overall character of Neoplatonic aesthetics. Al-Ghazālī says that as a matter of common consent it is thought possible to pass aesthetic judgement over most human artefacts; still, in such judgements, it is hardly the case that what is being judged is simply some sensible quality of the artefact in question. We do not judge a green chair to be beautiful because it is green, for instance: if our attention is drawn to the green *as* green, then we are judging the colour and not the chair. Rather, what is being judged in the case of artefacts is the object's conformity to the creative vision of the creator; and this in turn hinges upon a number of factors, all of which, however, reduce in the end to whether the artefact reflects the artificer's knowledge (*ilm*) and power (*qudra*; see al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:262.18). These are intentional or meaningful aspects (*ma'ānī*) of the work and of the workman's labours, and hence not reducible to raw material factors.

It is plain enough that al-Ghazālī's primary purpose in developing this view is to make allowances for how we can judge God's creation as a whole and in its every detail to be beautiful. Because every aspect of creation reflects the knowledge and power of its Creator, we can deem God not only the Creator of all out of nothing, but also the most paradigmatically knowledgeable and powerful Maker. (See al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:265.25 ff.) But what follows from al-Ghazālī's conception is a more general theory of artistic intention and meaning, one whose implications al-Ghazālī sketches in a throwaway comment: when we recognize some person (as a *person*, one might add – not, e.g. as a catwalk model or as a radio voice) as being beautiful, it is not the outward appearance of the person that we are perceiving, nor even that person's actions taken simply as actions (al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:265.22–23). Rather, we are gaining insight into the character that underlies all the diverse acts and bodily features. Likewise, take the person

who sees the beauty of an author's book or the beauty of a poet's poem or the beauty of a painter's painting or the beauty of a builder's building. To such a person, what are revealed are the effects of [the artisan's] beautiful and concealed attributes. Upon investigation, these all come down to knowledge and power. (al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:265.24–25)

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<sup>19</sup> The vast literature on this complex of interlocking Aristotelian metaphysical and epistemological concepts – form, function, perfection, definition, cognition – resists easy summarization, but see Modrak (2007) for a fresh and concise account.

Knowledge and power: as always, al-Ghazālī's theological preoccupations are plain enough. But what emerges from this passage is the understanding that the effects (*af'āl*) or traces or signs (*āthār*) issuing from an agent can be taken as genuine windows into the character of their maker, whether human or divine. Elsewhere in the *Revivification*, particularly in the psychologically foundational books 21–23, al-Ghazālī emphasizes the principle that the tree is known by its fruits (on this, see Kukkonen 2008). Conversely, this may be taken to mean equally as well that the intentions externalized in the shape of a work of art can succeed in telling us something about the intentions of the person who crafted it – but only to the extent that these include some genuinely universal and hence communicable aspects.

There is a further lesson here, this one cautionary. When one looks at a building somebody has built, it is qua builder that its maker becomes known to the observer.<sup>20</sup> The qualities that stand revealed to one who appreciates the artisan's craft all have to do with that particular area of expertise, they do not necessarily reach any further or deeper: a skilled musician may be a terrible writer, or indeed a terrible human being, and one may never learn about this simply going by the work. Among other things, this makes of the various productive arts reasonably autonomous areas of practice and study. Following through on the logic of al-Ghazālī's presentation would furthermore imply that art considered merely as art is value-neutral: the only thing that one needs to consider in passing aesthetic judgement is the inner teleology of a piece, whether it is of a whole and of the nature of a whole.<sup>21</sup>

e. Al-Ghazālī's account leaves open two questions, both of which can be seen as going back to the well-attested prophetic tradition al-Ghazālī himself cites: "God is beautiful and loves beauty" (*Allāhu jamīl yuḥibbu al-jamāl*; al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:261.18). How can God be said to be beautiful, when He is thought to be unique and without a likeness to anything? And how can God love anything, when He has no desire or need for anything? True to the didactic and non-confrontational

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20 Al-Ghazālī's discussion of the divine attributes is once again informative. In the *Beautiful Names* he explains in detail how belief in human knowledge of the attributes does not contravene the principle that the divine as such is unknowable: this is because none of the attributes touch on the divine essence. See al-Ghazālī 1982: 47–50.

21 Aristotle puts it in the beginning of the *Art of Rhetoric* (1.1) that the productive arts are by definition instrumental in nature and can therefore be used both for good purposes and for ill. Only the truth of the matter stands in the way of wickedness prevailing for very long, since one who has to falsify the evidence faces an uphill struggle in constantly bending the facts to his or her advantage.

style chosen for the *Revivification*, al-Ghazālī fails to tackle either problem head on, though he does provide some hints towards possible answers.

As far as God's beauty goes, al-Ghazālī's standard answer can be reconstructed on the basis of his general understanding of the divine names: when we say that God is beautiful, the beauty in question is really not that of the divine essence but that of the divine attributes. Whereas God considered simply as God is no more beautiful than He is visible – both are relational attributes – all of the true attributes of God amount to various modes of perfection, and these can unproblematically be described as beautiful. If one examines closely the examples al-Ghazālī gives of how God is beautiful in the *Revivification* (see al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:267.4–26), one sees that wherever these refer to positive aspects of divinity, they can be reduced to one divine name or other. By contrast, the divine essence cannot be apprehended by the human heart, nor will it ever become so.

This, however, still leaves a more general tension in al-Ghazālī's thought as regards the way the term "beautiful" is supposed to designate things in the mundane world and in the supernal world, respectively. We have already seen how on the one hand al-Ghazālī says that people first coined the term when they encountered beautiful objects to which their senses were drawn in their everyday existence; on the other, he insists that only God is beautiful in the absolute sense of the word (*muṭlaq-an*; al-Ghazālī 2002: 4:267.4). It is difficult to see how both could be true at the same time. If the beauty of God really is primary then it will, precisely as such, be unknowable; if by contrast earthly beauty comes first, then the concept of beauty will not truly touch upon the divine but at most may be extended to it in a metaphorical sense (*majāz-an*; see, e.g. al-Ghazālī 1982: 84.17–18). This, however, is a general problem for al-Ghazālī's theory of the divine attributes, and not one for the concept of beauty in specific.

As for God loving what is beautiful, the trouble here has to do with the scheme of Platonic *erōs* as a whole. Such erotic love and longing takes the form of an ascent towards the beautiful, the good, and the true; and if it is thought that God is all of these to the highest possible degree, then it is hard to see what kind of love should be ascribed to God Himself. The only available option seems to be to say that God loves Himself, and even this breaches the terms of the explanatory scheme as originally postulated.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the case, God cannot love anything below Him in the sense of a desire for that thing: the higher by definition cannot aim at the lower. So what are we to make of God's supposed love for the beautiful?

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22 Al-Ghazālī does seem to accept this notion, but at least he has the weight of tradition behind him in doing so (Bell 1979: 70–73).

Al-Ghazālī's answer, in brief, is to stipulate that there is another way of conceptualizing love, one that has to do essentially with generosity (*jūd*) and munificence. In this way it can be said that God is the ultimate lover, for He bestows every goodness upon each and every one of His creatures, starting with the primary good of their very existence. Moreover, because beauty has to do with proportion and measure, the fact that God is supremely equitable and just and allots to each thing its appropriate form shows how God loves all beauty, including His own but not limited to it. The trouble with this attempt at amelioration is that it requires al-Ghazālī to step outside the bounds of his chosen explanatory scheme, to the extent that it is hard to see what his new conception of love (let us call it Love-B) has to do with the original erotic model (Love-A) anymore. And if Love-B completely differs from Love-A, then what use is the Prophetic tradition anymore in trying to illumine human experience in light of what is said about the divine, or vice versa? Again, this is more a problem for al-Ghazālī's general theory of love (and perhaps for his theory of semantics in relation to divine predication) than it is for his notion of beauty as such.

A full philosophical account of these two problems, as well as of their possible solutions in al-Ghazālī, will have to wait another occasion. What I think these two examples show is how deeply indebted al-Ghazālī is to Greek philosophy and to its continuation in *falsafa* for the theoretical framework in which he chooses to explore the issues he finds of interest, including that of beauty. Al-Ghazālī does not begin from the tradition attributed to Muḥammad ("God is beautiful and loves beauty") and work from there to come up with definitions of beauty and love that would tidily spin out of this primary claim; rather, he first picks a theory that he finds persuasive and of interest – that advanced by the philosophers – and then tries to find a way to accommodate the Prophetic traditions within this ready-made frame. Al-Ghazālī's aesthetic theory is philosophical through and through; his proclaimed theology presents serious problems for the theory, but al-Ghazālī sees in this no reason to abandon the theory and begin anew. In this, as in many other respects, his work can be seen as a legitimate continuation of the *falsafa* tradition. Furthermore, in al-Ghazālī's statement that inner beauty is to be preferred to outward loveliness, we can hear echoes of the larger gnomological literary tradition.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> al-Ghazālī 1982, 127; cf. Rosenthal 1971: 14–19; on the love of beautiful faces in Avicenna and the earlier tradition, see Bell 1986: 85–89.

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