

Discourse on Beauty

The concept of beauty has inspired generations of Muslim intellectuals—philosophers, Sufis, dogmatic theologians, jurists, and litterateurs—to engage in discourse from various angles, ranging from poetry to metaphysics. Some took a practical interest in the subject, discussing how to create beautiful and persuasive writings (as in poetics) or whether it is permissible to display external beauty (as in jurisprudence); others took a more theoretical approach, analyzing the concept of beauty as such. Among all these Muslim intellectuals, two groups have made notable contributions on both the practical and the theoretical levels: Sufis and philosophers. Sufis saw God as their beautiful beloved and sought intimacy with Him by beautifying their inner qualities. Philosophers, not least because of the influence of the *Theology of Aristotle*, a compilation of paraphrases from Plotinus’s *Enneads*, equated beauty with being, their fundamental subject of analysis.

Close examination of key discussions in three major schools of thought—philosophy (*falsafa*), Sufism (*taṣawwuf*, *‘irfān*), and dogmatic theology (*kalām*)—reveals Muslim thinkers’ wide-ranging yet interconnected reflections on the notion of beauty (*jamāl*, *ḥusn*). It is these reflections that provide the intellectual milieu in which Rūzbihān’s theory of beauty may be situated. It must be noted that the lines separating these three schools of thought are not clear-cut, because many scholars, like al-Ghazālī, combine the various perspectives.

The foundation of much Muslim discourse on beauty (*jamāl*) is the saying of Muhammad, “Indeed, God is beautiful and He loves beauty” (*Inna Allāh jamīl yuḥibb al-jamāl*).¹ This ḥadīth has had practical and theoretical implications for generations of Muslims, who took it as an encouragement to pursue beauty on various levels—from personal grooming to the improvement of one’s moral qualities to the quest for an encounter with God. There are many other ḥadīths and Qur’ānic verses of import for the Muslim understanding of beauty, most often using the other Arabic word root denoting beauty: *ḥ-s-n*. These include such Qur’ānic verses as *Blessed is God, the most beautiful (aḥsan) of creators* (Q 23:14) and *We have created the human being in the most beautiful stature* (Q 95:4).

Among ḥadīths, one that plays an especially important role is the so-called ḥadīth of Gabriel, according to which the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad in front of a number of companions to ask him about the religion that he was teaching them. Muhammad explained that it has three basic dimensions—*islām* (submission), *īmān* (faith), and *iḥsān* (doing what is beautiful; a fourth-form derivation from *ḥasuna*, i.e., to be beautiful). Doing what is beautiful means to “worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.”¹⁴ On the basis of this statement, Muslims have understood the complementarity of the acts of submission, faith, and beautiful intention, with the last holding the key to the perfection or “beautification” of Muslim faith and worship.

If we turn to Muslim cultural production, we find poets, litterateurs, Qur’ān reciters, and calligraphers searching for the best sensory means of expressing beauty—whether literary, auditory, or visual. In contrast, philosophers, dogmatic theologians, and Sufis tended to ponder the nature of beauty primarily on the intelligible level, so as to understand the principles behind beautiful phenomena in the world, while striving for an experience of beauty beyond the sensible world.

In terms of the sheer diversity of the angles through which beauty was analyzed as a concept and as a sensible phenomenon, no group surpasses the philosophers (*falāsifa*). Their investigation ranges over fields such as rhetoric, poetics, optics, and music.² Along with the Sufis and, to a lesser degree, the dogmatic theologians, the philosophers also paid close

attention to beauty in the areas of metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, and ethics. In fact, it is these last four fields of inquiry that lie at the center of the shared discourse on beauty among Muslim intellectuals.

Recent Western scholarship has pointed out that despite the abundance of philosophical discussion of the idea and phenomena of beauty, aesthetics—i.e., investigation of the principles of beauty and human taste on the sensible level—was never a major topic of discussion in Muslim philosophy. As Deborah Black writes,

On the whole, Islamic philosophers did not view artistic and literary creativity as ends in themselves. Rather, their interest was in explaining the relations of these activities to purely intellectual ends. In the case of poetics and rhetoric in particular, the emphasis in Islamic philosophy was pragmatic and political: poetics and rhetoric were viewed as instruments for communicating the demonstrated truths of philosophy to the populace, whose intellectual abilities were presumed to be limited.³

For the philosophers, the pursuit of the principles of beauty in the sensible order of things (art, literature, speech, etc.) was a means to an end—i.e., to maximize the effect of their words on the masses in their effort to convey philosophical truths to them for educational purposes. This is in contrast to the *udabā'* ("litterateurs"), whose goals did not usually go beyond the very act of producing beautiful literature that appeals to human sensibility. Aaron Hughes argues that the philosophers focused primarily on the process of intellection in the human aesthetic experience, that is, the soul's encounter with a beautiful object:

Although Muslim and Jewish philosophers approached aesthetics from what we would today call a number of different disciplinary perspectives, common to all is the role and function of beauty in the noetic development of the individual. This involves...a process whereby an individual

encounters a beautiful object, resulting in a subsequent correspondence between the soul of the knower and the object known. This correspondence in turn allows the individual to recognize the beauty of the intelligible world.⁴

Common to the philosophers, dogmatic theologians, and Sufis is the notion that the highest degree of beauty belongs to the most perfect being, which the philosophers call the "Necessary Being" or "First Cause," and which the dogmatic theologians and Sufis call "God." Although the language and approach used by each group differs, the general content of their discussion can be categorized into the following main themes: ontology (i.e., beauty as perfection of being), theology (beauty as an attribute of God), cosmogony and cosmology (the role of beauty in the origination and structure of the world), ethics (how to beautify one's soul by acquiring virtues), and psychology (the effect of beauty on the human soul).

Ontology

The most fundamental aspect of the philosophical discourse on beauty is ontology. Al-Fārābī (d. 950), for instance, argues that beauty (*jamāl*) is found in that which "is in its most excellent state of existence and...has attained its ultimate perfection."⁵ Al-Fārābī maintains that the intensity of beauty is proportionate to the degree of a thing's ontological perfection. Hence, he concludes, "[S]ince the First is in the most excellent state of existence, its beauty surpasses the beauty of every other beautiful existent."⁶

Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna; d. 1037) writes: "There cannot exist beauty (*jamāl*) or splendor beyond that [being whose] quiddity is purely intelligible, purely good, free from any deficiency, and unique in all respects. The Necessary Being has pure beauty and splendor."⁷ Here Ibn Sīnā is speaking about the same being that al-Fārābī has referred to as "the First," but he adds another point: since ultimate beauty can be found only in the perfect being that is purely intelligible and good, it cannot

be found in the sensible world, which is a realm of deficiency and imperfect being.

Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who inherited elements from various intellectual schools including philosophy (while publicly presenting himself as a critic of philosophy), offers a similar ontological analysis of beauty though with a subtle difference. He argues that every single thing has a unique perfection proper to itself, and its particular beauty depends on the degree to which it has actualized the perfection that is meant for it.

Each thing's beauty (*jamāl* and *ḥusn*) is for the perfection that is fitting and possible for it to be present with it. When all its possible perfections are present, it will be in the utmost limit of beauty. If only some of them are present, it will have beauty in the measure of what is present. Thus a beautiful horse is that which combines all that is fitting for a horse, such as appearance, shape, color, beautiful running, and ease in attack and retreat. A beautiful script is that which combines all that is fitting for a script, such as the proportion of the letters, their alignment, their being in the right sequence, and the beauty of their order.

Each thing has a perfection that is fitting for it, and its opposite may be fitting for something else. So the beauty of each thing lies in its fitting perfection. Thus the human being is not beautiful through what makes a horse beautiful, nor is a script beautiful through what makes a voice beautiful, nor are vessels beautiful through what makes clothing beautiful, and so on with other things.⁸

What is noteworthy here is that instead of regarding sensible things as imperfect beings in contrast to its ultimate source—God—al-Ghazālī recognizes a relative perfection of each thing, that is to say, a perfection that is specific and uniquely proper to each object. The degree of each thing's relative perfection accounts for its beauty. By acknowledging that each thing has a relative perfection, al-Ghazālī is able to analyze the beauty of

sensible objects on their own terms without constant recourse to God as the highest principle of beauty—thus venturing into the area of aesthetics proper. Underlying all these discussions by al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Ghazālī is the fundamental notion of beauty as the perfection of being.

Theology

The dogmatic theologians addressed the issue of beauty on the basis of the Qurʾān's ascription of the most beautiful names (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*) to God (7:180; 17:110; 20:8; 59:24). Many concluded that the names should be numbered ninety-nine and extracted from the language of the Qurʾān itself. They were able to establish a more or less standard list of God's most beautiful names, with a good deal of variation.⁹ On the basis of the lists of the divine names, they divided a major cluster into two types: the names of gentleness (*luṭf*) and the names of severity (*qahr*), corresponding to the two opposing aspects of God seen in relation to His creation.¹⁰ They also called these two types the names of bounty (*faḍl*) and justice (*ʿadl*), or mercy (*rahma*) and wrath (*ghaḍab*). For example, the name "life-giver" (*muḥyi*) indicates God's gentle or merciful side, and "death-giver" (*mumīt*) shows His severe or wrathful side. According to this schematization of the divine names, the names of gentleness are seen to attract human beings to God and create intimacy between them, whereas the names of severity inspire fear in human beings and put them at distance from God. These two opposing categories of divine names came to be also referred to as the names of beauty (*jamāl*) and names of majesty (*jalāl*).¹¹

That God has these two dimensions—the beautiful and the majestic, the gentle and the severe—is a widespread theme in Sufi texts, be they commentaries on the divine names, such as those of al-Qushayrī, al-Ghazālī, Samʿānī, and Ibn al-ʿArabī, or other works that deal with theological issues. The general question of the divine attributes interested philosophers as well. Their main concern was the exact ontological relationship between the divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) and the divine essence (*dhāt*)—in other words, whether the attributes were identical

with the essence, and if not how it would then be possible to maintain God's oneness. For instance, in Book Eight of *al-Shifā*, "On Knowing the First Principle of All Existence and On Knowing His Attributes," Ibn Sīnā has a chapter entitled, "On the relation of the intelligibles to Him; on making it clear that His positive and negative attributes do not necessitate multiplicity in His essence; that to Him belong the most tremendous splendor, the loftiest majesty, and infinite glory; on explaining in detail the state of intellective pleasure."¹²

If the dogmatic theologians sought to systematize their understanding of God's beauty by setting up schemes to categorize the Qur'ānic names of God, the philosophers engaged mainly in the analysis of God's beauty in terms of ontology, leading them to the conviction that beauty and being are identical. As for the Sufis, for the most part they agreed with the views of both philosophers and theologians, but they also stressed the implications of God's beautiful names for human life, as people should study and know the divine names with the aim of beautifying the soul by embodying God's most beautiful qualities. They took a variety of approaches to this task, as we will see with Rūzbihān.

Cosmology

In addressing the cosmological significance of beauty, we might begin by recalling the original sense of the Greek word *cosmos*—"order." It is this that constituted beauty for the ancient Greeks. The Muslim philosophers show a strong Greek influence in their analysis of beauty; especially prominent are elements of Pythagoreanism and Neoplatonism, both of which had been transmitted to the Muslim world through Syriac and Arabic translations before the tenth century. A perfect example of the combination of the Pythagorean and Plotinian understanding of beauty is found in the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' ("the Brethren of Purity"), a group of anonymous tenth-century philosophers who composed an encyclopedic work, *al-Rasā'il* ("The Epistles"), covering a vast range of philosophical topics. In their discussion of music, for example, the Ikhwān speak of the music of the spheres, which appears in accordance with

the Pythagorean principle of proportion, as well as the moral benefit of music in taming the animal soul.¹³

As for the Neoplatonic side of the discussion, the Ikhwān explain that a human aesthetic experience depends on the mutual relationship between the universal and the particular souls. Perceiving beauty in a sensible object is an occasion for the particular soul to be reminded of its higher origin, the universal soul that lies in the intelligible realm, which is the realm of true beauty. Such an experience calls the soul to return to its origin by making it turn away from corporeal existence. The Ikhwān write,

When the traces of beautiful (*ḥisān*) sensory things take form in particular souls, these [souls] come to resemble and correspond to the universal soul, yearn for it, and wish to join with it. When they become separate from the bodily frame, they will ascend to the kingdom of heaven and join with the highest plenum.¹⁴

By “the highest plenum” (*al-malaʿ al-aʿlā*), the Ikhwān explain, they mean “the residents of the heavens and the celestial spheres.”¹⁵

The above passage echoes Plotinus’s discussion in the *Ennead* I.6.2: “the soul, since it is by nature what it is and is related to the higher kind of reality in the realm of being, when it sees something akin to it or a trace of its kindred reality, is delighted and thrilled and returns to itself and remembers itself and its own possessions.”¹⁶ For both Plotinus and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʿ, the true experience of beauty pertains to the intelligible world, not to the sensible. At the same time they also recognize that sensible beauty prompts the individual soul to conform or attune¹⁷ itself to its original state of beauty through the process of recollection.

The notion that the individual soul mirrors the beauty of higher order resonates with much of Sufi thinking as well. Though it is almost impossible to pinpoint where Muslim writings come under direct Greek influence outside the philosophical tradition, especially in the later centuries, the general Muslim discourse on beauty—especially among the

Sufis—has certain striking similarities to the Plotinian understanding whether there be direct or indirect influence or not.

Cosmogony

As for the function of beauty in cosmogony, beauty plays a significant role especially in the general Sufi understanding of creation (*khalq*). There is a crucial “creation myth” found in many Sufi texts. This is the so-called ḥadīth of the Hidden Treasure, in which God says, “I was a Hidden Treasure, and I loved to be recognized. So I created the creatures so that I may be recognized.”¹⁸ In general, Sufis interpret this saying in the following manner. The clause “I was a Hidden Treasure” corresponds to the state of God in His solitude without the presence of anything else. While God knew and loved Himself in His solitude, He wanted something else to appreciate and come to know His Treasure. Hence, God created the world so that His Hidden Treasure would no longer be hidden. Thus, God’s love for Himself and His desire to be known are the driving force for the creation of the world.

In conjunction with another key ḥadīth, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty,” the ḥadīth of the Hidden Treasure has contributed to the idea that creation was driven by God’s desire to manifest His *beauty* so that it might be witnessed and known by others. Creation is then the self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of God’s beauty as a result of His overflowing love for His own beauty. This process also brings about the duality of subject and object, knower and known, lover and beloved. Without creation, God’s beauty could not have been known or loved by *anything else*.

Ethics and Chivalry

Ethics (*‘ilm al-akhlāq*) and etiquette (*ādāb*) are subjects discussed by practically all groups of Muslim intellectuals, though it was the philosophers who established ethics as a discipline. They often regarded it as “medicine for the soul,” just as there is medicine for the body. The philosopher-physician

Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (Rhazes), for example, wrote an ethical treatise entitled *Spiritual Medicine* (*al-Tibb al-rūḥānī*), full of advice on how to control one's lower self or soul (*nafs*) and to treat its various illnesses, such as envy, anger, and lust, all of which are generally considered ugly qualities of the human soul. The goal of philosophical ethics can be taken as the beautification of the soul, which involves the removal of the vices of the lower soul that hinder the higher functions of the rational soul.

The emphasis on disciplining and beautifying the soul is even more evident in Sufism, where the soul is described as being in need of ascending a stairway back to God in the footsteps of the Prophet in his *mi'raj*. Each step in the path is understood as an increase in proximity to the divine beauty, and the steps are typically understood as refinements and beautifications of the soul. Rūzbihān's *Mashrab al-arwāḥ* is an example of the genre.

Sufi literature addresses ethics in a variety of ways. One of the most distinctive instances is a current of thought and practice known as *futuwwa*, or "chivalry," which is characterized by the training of the soul in ethics, that is, the beautiful traits of the soul, such as generosity, self-sacrifice, humbleness, camaraderie, and mutual respect. *Futuwwa* literally means "young-manliness," representing the "young man" (*fatā*) ideal characterized by the above-listed virtues. Sufis often discuss Abraham and Joseph as representatives of the young man ideal as the Qur'ān calls each a *fatā*, along with the Companions of the Cave, who in Maybudī's view encapsulate the young man ideal.¹⁹

Among prominent Sufi authors who wrote on *futuwwa* were al-Sulamī (d. 1021), Shihāb al-Din 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d. 1234), and Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240). Though essentially a practical discipline, underlying the ideals of *futuwwa* is a radical commitment to *tawḥīd*, or the assertion of God's oneness, in everyday human conduct by giving no significance to anything other than God, above all one's own ego. By sacrificing self-concern in interhuman transactions, Sufi "chevaliers" strive to live up to the beautiful young man ideal modeled on Abraham, who was ready to sacrifice his own beloved son for the sake of God.

On a more general level, Sufi ethics also revolves around the idea of “becoming characterized by the character traits of God” (*takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*)—which comes from a statement ascribed to Muhammad and which Sufis took to mean the cultivation or internalization of the most beautiful names of God. In support of this ideal, al-Ghazālī quotes another ḥadīth connected with God’s most beautiful names: “God has ninety-nine character traits: whosoever becomes characterized by one of them will surely enter the Garden.”²⁰

Psychology of Beauty and Love

Psychology, or the study of the soul (*‘ilm al-nafs*) is a well-established subfield of philosophy, so it is no surprise to find philosophers analyzing beauty in psychological terms. Ibn Sīnā explores the psychology of beauty in a treatise called *Risāla fī al-‘ishq* (“Treatise on Love”), which contains a detailed analysis of various kinds of love. In keeping with the Aristotelian psychology adopted by most Muslim thinkers, Ibn Sīnā divides the “soul” into several kinds, each of which embraces the qualities of the lower kind—the vegetative, animal, human, and angelic—and argues that each kind possesses a kind of “love” according to its own nature.²¹

When Ibn Sīnā analyzes the animal and rational souls, he points out that *sensible* beauty causes love in the *animal* soul, while *intelligible* beauty causes love in the *rational* soul. He explains that loving sensible beauty brings human beings down to the level of beasts, and loving *intelligible* beauty raises the soul to its most noble level. Such a view comes from his basic understanding that intelligible beauty serves as a ladder for the human being to come closer to the Absolute Good (which he calls elsewhere the Necessary Being or God). This Good is the rational soul’s ultimate object of contemplation. It is the cause and origin of all sensible and intelligible beauty, the possessor of the highest beauty, and the ultimate object of love.²² Ibn Sīnā thus discovers a necessary connection between beauty and love on all levels of existence and considers the Absolute Good as the most proper object of love for the

rational soul. In explaining such hierarchical scheme of love and beauty, Ibn Sīnā places a definite emphasis on the significance of intelligibility even in the human experience of love.

Love also plays an extremely important role in Sufi psychology. Generations of Sufis have written works explaining the distinctions to be drawn among the soul (*naḥs*), the spirit (*rūḥ*), the heart (*qalb*), and the secret core (*sirr*). They investigated various states (*aḥwāl*) of the human soul, such as hope, fear, joy, sorrow, bewilderment, and love. They also wrote many works revolving around the theme of love and beauty. The Persian poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) is one of the most famous Sufis who spoke about the necessity of love in human life and the path to God. Other Sufis known for their talk of love and beauty include Aḥmad Ghazālī (d. ca. 1126), Aḥmad Sam‘ānī (d. 1140), ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī (d. 1131), Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl (d. 1191), Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209), and Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240).

Most Sufis were aware that love and beauty are inseparable, for the source of all love in the universe is the fact that God loves beauty. As a result, human love necessarily takes beauty as its object. Aḥmad Ghazālī points out that beauty always needs a lover: “The eye of beauty is shut to its own beauty, for it cannot perceive the perfection of its own beauty except in the mirror of the lover’s love. Hence, in this respect, beauty must have a lover so that the beloved may feed on its own beauty in the mirror of the lover’s love and seeking.”²³ Here emerges a basic Sufi picture of beauty as the perennial beloved (*maḥbūb*, *ma‘shūq*). Just as the philosophers regard the First Cause or the Necessary Being as the ultimate object of contemplation and love for the rational soul, the Sufis also see God as their eternal beloved, with whom they strive forever, in this world and the next, to achieve union.

Psychology of Beauty and Pleasure

In psychological analyses of beauty, philosophers often associate beauty with the pleasure (*ladhdha*) that accompanies the perception of beauty. They point out that the more beautiful a thing is, the greater the pleasure is in perceiving it. Hence,

given that the First is the most perfect and the most beautiful being, the pleasure It causes is also the greatest—to the point that it is beyond human comprehension. Al-Fārābī writes, “Pleasure and delight and enjoyment result and increase only when the most accurate apprehension concerns itself with the most beautiful...objects.”²⁴ Moreover, “since the First is absolutely the most beautiful...the pleasure which the First enjoys is a pleasure whose character we do not understand and whose intensity we fail to apprehend, except by analogy.”²⁵

In contrast to al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā focuses on the intense pleasure that people experience in the cognition of intelligible beauty. He argues that since intelligible beauty is superior to sensible beauty and causes more intense pleasure, human beings must separate themselves from their bodily dimension in order to experience it. He writes, “If we become isolated from our body by examining our essence—when it has become an intellective world corresponding to the true existents, the true beauties, and the true pleasures and become conjoined with them as the intelligible is conjoined with the intelligible—then we will find infinite pleasure and splendor.”²⁶ Ibn Sīnā’s emphasis on the necessity of separating the intellect from the body to experience the true pleasure of perceiving beauty may echo the Plotinian disdain for the body and the search for beauty in the intelligible realm, but the emphasis on the intelligible over the sensible is common across all currents of philosophical (and Sufi) thinking in Islam.

Psychology of Beauty and Sorrow

If the perception of beauty causes love and pleasure, the failure to perceive beauty, that is, the object of one’s love, will result in sorrow (*huzn*), as some Muslim thinkers point out. The connection between beauty and sorrow is a theme that appears in the Qur’ān itself and is a well-developed literary theme in post-Qur’ānic literature. The Qur’ān’s twelfth chapter consists mainly of a narrative on the life of Joseph, and the Qur’ān calls it *the most beautiful of tales* (Q 12:3). Joseph’s beauty was the reason that Jacob had a particular attachment to him

among all his sons, and due to the loss of Joseph Jacob fell into despair and sorrow.

This Qur'ānic narrative inspired the Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) philosopher Suhrawardī to compose the allegorical tale, "On the Reality of Love" (*Risāla fī ḥaqīqat al-‘ishq*), to depict the interrelationship among beauty, love, and sorrow, by presenting them as three brothers with distinct personalities.²⁷ In this allegory, Beauty is the eldest brother to whom the second brother Love clings, but when Love is separated from Beauty, Sorrow becomes Love's constant companion. Sorrow also befriends both Jacob upon the loss of his son and Zulaykhā, the unnamed wife of the vizier of Egypt (biblical Potiphar) in the Qur'ān, who suffers unfulfilled love for Joseph.

If we combine our earlier discussion of the divine names with the present analysis of human psychology, the following picture emerges: when human beings encounter God's mercy, gentleness, and beauty (*jamāl*), their natural reaction to it will be attraction and love. When faced with God's wrath, severity, and majesty (*jalāl*), they will likely experience alienation and sorrow. This theological fact is reflected in the art of Qur'ānic recitation, according to Michael Sells: in the recitation of verses that highlight human beings' encounter with God's majesty or their alienation from Him, the dominating tone is that of sorrow.²⁸

Summary

The general picture that emerges from this analysis of the Muslim discourse on beauty is as follows. It begins with the understanding that the first principle, the perfect being, is beautiful. God is the possessor of the most beautiful names, but in relation to the world, He can be beautiful or majestic, merciful or wrathful. He knew His own beauty for eternity, and He created the world because of His desire to make His beauty known in the temporal realm.

God's beauty is reflected in the cosmic order. Higher levels of beauty correspond with higher levels of intelligibility, and lower levels appear in the sensible realm. The harmony produced by this cosmic order reminds the human soul, which is

engrossed in corporeality, of its higher origin and invites it to turn away from the sensible world toward the intelligible world. The human aesthetic experience—that is, finding beauty through the senses—has the proper function of directing attention to that which is beyond the sensible world. Beauty is a powerful force that attracts human beings and redirects them toward the intelligible realm because all beauty derives from the ultimate principle of beauty, perfection, and intelligibility.

Human beings are naturally drawn to beauty and find it lovable by nature. In their search for beauty, they may find pleasure in attaining the object of their love, but they will experience sorrow if they lose access to their beloved—be it divine, human, animal, vegetative, or even mineral—because it is the very nature of human beings to love beauty. Sorrow is then the longing for a lost or unattainable beauty, and pleasure and joy result from attaining beauty.

When human beings realize that the ultimate source of all beauty is God, they become lovers of God and strive to see more of His beauty. They realize that this requires the refinement of their inner qualities, for the beautiful God cannot be seen by someone whose heart is rusty and full of ugly character traits. In this process, they try to turn away from the lower animal soul and its egoistic desires so as to seek ultimate beauty alone. As a result of perseverance in this quest, they become purified of the lower realm. It is in such state of purity that the heart can reflect a beautiful image of the divine in itself, and they themselves become beautiful.

For many of the thinkers examined above, to search for beauty was to seek God. For both the philosophers and Sufis, an aesthetic experience is a reminder or sign of God, because they know that every beautiful object derives from its beautiful Creator. Perhaps the role of the dogmatic theologians in shaping this view was less discernible than the philosophers and Sufis, but they still had the important function of providing a terminological framework for speaking about God as “beautiful,” for example, in their discussion of the divine names. However, the dogmatic theologians’ strictly rationalist interpretation of Qur’ānic language and their rejection of the cognitive value of images and symbols seem to have restricted

their discussion on the nature of beauty to a limited and rigid framework.

In contrast, philosophers did not limit themselves to language drawn from the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth. They felt free to use terminology based on Arabic translations of Greek sources or the Persian intellectual tradition. They approached beauty in terms of things' intelligibility, for they saw the sensible world per se as a realm of imperfection, deficiency, and ugliness, unless one saw through its phenomena to their intelligible sources, that is, the realities of things in the divine. Ultimate beauty per se is to be found only in the intelligible world, in the most perfect being, which transcends human cognitive capacity. By exercising the intellect fully, they strove to come ever closer to a pure cognition of the most perfect being as far as humanly possible. In contrast to the dogmatic theologians' focus on the abstractions of reason, the philosophers also turned their attention to the sensible world to illustrate how the principles of beauty left their traces in the sensible order of things, and this attention to the world resulted in the development of aesthetic theories in optics, rhetoric, and poetics.

For their part Sufis sought to attain the highest beauty by a process of inner transformation—i.e., purification and beautification—driven by their love for God. Given that it is God's love and beauty that brought the world into existence, it is that same love and beauty that bring human beings back to the divine presence. While this is a picture that emerges from those of the Muslim thinkers who have specifically written about beauty, we can say that most Muslim thinkers have traditionally understood that the search for beauty in various areas of human life is part of their religious path—the path to human perfection—for all beauty is a pointer to its origin, God.