

IHSAN

AESTHETIC
ETHICS

BY HUSSEIN RASHID

INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons I became interested in studying Islam is because of the beauty I saw within the tradition. This beauty was both theological and cultural. My humble thoughts here are a way to think about how the theological and cultural connect. It is meant to be abstract, because I think the second we try to define something, it loses the ambiguity that makes it beautiful. We can create an elegant definition of beauty, but that definition becomes a layer between us and beauty, keeping us from the ineffable nature of beauty. I wanted to engage with beauty from within our tradition, and only within our tradition, without explicit references to aesthetic theory from Western antiquity or the "bio-politics" of contemporary European thinkers. I also want to think about what beauty means in practice. I want to think about what it means to be a partner in beauty.

In a hadith qudsi, God says to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) that God is beautiful and loves beauty (اللَّهُ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ). The words that God uses for “beauty” come from the Arabic root j-m-l, meaning an outward or physical beauty. Yet we know that God has no physical appearance, so what does it mean when we are told that “God is beautiful”? I propose that we have to understand beauty as tied to iman (faith). Beauty is an aspect of ethical and spiritual development, not a fleeting aspect of the physical. Drawing on Muslim histories and traditions, I want

us to think about the contribution we make to beauty in the world as tied to ethical transformation, which can and should be aesthetically pleasing.

To answer the question of what it means to say “God is beautiful” when God has no physical form, I turn to the teachings of Imam Ali (as). Any time we speak of God as having any attributes that we can ascribe to God, we are committing shirk, or association with God. Imam Ali (as) tells us:

Foremost in religion is knowledge of Him, and the perfection of knowledge is believing in Him, and the perfection of this belief is affirming His oneness, and the perfection of this affirmation is one's devotion to Him, and the perfection of this devotion is to divest Him of all attributes—because of the testimony of every object that it is other than the object of attribution, and because of the testimony of every such object that it is other than the attribute, whoever ascribes an attribute to God—glorified be He!—has associated [with something else], and whoever so conjoins Him has made Him two, and whoever makes Him twofold has fragmented Him, and whoever fragments Him is ignorant of Him. And whoever points to Him has divided Him, and whoever confines Him counts Him; and whoever asks ‘in what is He?’ isolates Him, and whoever asks ‘upon what?’ isolates Him.

The association of anything with God diminishes us and our ability to fully understand the Divine, as we fundamentally misunderstand God. Of course, God always leaves us a way to think about the nature of the Divine. I would argue creation becomes a way to understand the presence of God in the world.

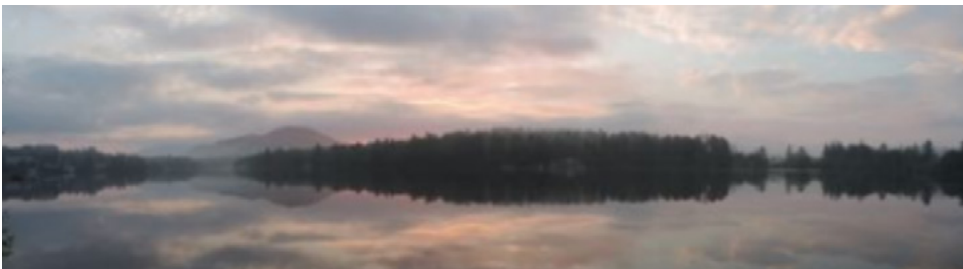
¹Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam Ali* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 208.

The Qur'an is replete with examples of Allah telling us that creation is a sign if we choose to understand it. For example, the following verses engage our senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell (all translations adapted from Ali Quli Qarai).

And whatever Allah has created for you in the earth of div
is indeed a sign in that for a people who take admonition.

Among God's signs is the creation of the heavens and the e
difference of your languages and colors. There are indeed
for those who know. (30: 22)

In the earth are signs for those who have conviction,
and in your souls [as well]. Will you not then perceive? (



Mirror Lake, New York, at dawn. The passing reflection of the real at the emergence of light. Photo by Hussein Rashid

The last verse reminds us that we too are a locus of signs; we are part of creation, subject to the command of the Divine. Creation is meant to be a series of signs, and signs that we cannot deny (40:81). These signs engage all our senses and are reminders that they are gifts from God. It is through recognizing that these are gifts from The Compassionate and The Merciful

that we understand creation as beautiful. God's creation is beautiful because God loves beauty, and we understand beauty through creation, so we understand God to be beautiful. That understanding of beauty is only to our level, not to that of the Divine. Divine Beauty is beyond our comprehension and creation is an expression of Divine Beauty and a way to understand it.

This question of the differences between the limits of our capacity to understand God and the capacity of the Divine to express Himself has been a favorite topic of those who worship God. Thinking through how we approach formal worship gives us an opportunity to reflect. Imam Zayn al-Abidin (as) offers in his prayers that we are incapable of properly worshipping God, but because God commands it, we must do it and elevate ourselves in the process. He says:

My God, tongues fall short of attaining praise of You proper to Your intellects are incapable of grasping the core of Your beauty, eyes fail before gazing upon the glories of Your face, and You have assigned to Your creatures no way to know You save incapacity to know You! (Munajat of the Knowers)

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My God, the uninterrupted flow of Your graciousness has distracted me. The food of Your bounty has rendered me incapable of counting Your prayers. The succession of Your kind acts has diverted me from mentioning You. The continuous rush of Your benefits has thwarted me from spreading the gentle favors! (Munajat of the Thankful)

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My God, were it not incumbent to accept Your command, I would declare You far too exalted for me to remember You, for I remember You in my measure, not in Your measure, and my scope can hardly reach the point where I may be a locus for glory. Among Your greatest favors to us is the continuation of Your remembrance and Your permission to us to supplicate You, declare You exalted, and glorify You! (Munajat of the Rememberers)

² Adapted from Zayn al-Abidin, *Ali ibn al-Husayn, The Psalms of Islam: Al-Sahifat Al-Kamilat Al-Sajjadiyya*, trans. William C. Chittick (London: Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1988).

According to these prayers, the act of worship is an act of obedience to God. We obey God because we too are part of creation. As a part of creation we are beautiful. Returning to Imam Ali (as), he tells us that in creation, God made us balanced and with purpose:

Then He breathed into it of His spirit, and it stood up as endowed with intellectual powers with which to reflect, tho to conduct himself, limbs to put to service, instruments a and knowledge with which to discern between the true and t between different tastes and fragrances, and between diffe categories; having a constitution compounded of different l forms, contrasting oppositions, and distinct admixtures of moisture and dryness.

In this passage, Imam Ali is explicit that God made us with purpose and with balance. Prayer is a way to explore and appreciate the idea of creation in balance.

³Shah-Kazemi, *Justice and Remembrance*, 33.

This internal balance, and the connection to the rest of creation as emerging from the Divine, reminds us that we have obligations and commitments beyond ourselves. Imam Jafar (as) says:

The roots of conduct have four aspects: conduct with Allah, the self, conduct with creation (i.e., people), and conduct with the world. Each of these aspects is based upon seven principles. There are seven principles of conduct with Allah: giving Him what He wants, keeping His limits, being thankful for His gift, being content with His decree, being patient with His trials, glorifying His power, and yearning for Him.

The seven principles of conduct with the self are fear, staying away from enduring harm, spiritual discipline, seeking truthfulness, being content, withdrawing the self from what it loves, and binding it in the path of God (faqr).

The seven principles of conduct with creation are forbearance, forgiveness, humility, generosity, compassion, good counsel, and fairness.

The seven principles of conduct with this world are being content with what is at hand, preferring what is available to what is not available, the quest for the elusive, hating overabundance, choosing simplicity (zuhd), knowing the evils of this world and abandoning any attachment to it, and negating its⁴ dominance.

Because we are all part of creation (khalq), there is a way to behave in the world, an ethics (akhlaq). This ethics is what we owe each other by virtue of being created—what we owe each other because of and through God.

⁴Ja'far al-Sadiq, *The Lantern of the Path*, trans. Fadhllalla Haeri (Dorset, UK: Element Books, 1989), 1.

The idea of akhlaq, what we owe each other because of God, is not the totality of understanding ethics. Beauty, so far, has been about jamal (j-m-l), which is a physical, or outward, beauty. Although Sufis later connect it back to God's qualities, and state that we love God because of how we perceive God's beauty, I want to keep the focus of jamal on physical attributes.

To paraphrase the great Angstian philosophers of the '80s, "I don't want to start any blasphemous rumors," but I think that God has a sense of humor. The root j-m-l is not just for "beauty," but also for "camel." Like a camel, physical beauty has a purpose, but we shouldn't confuse the conveyance for the goal. Do not be attached to the camel/physical beauty/the world, but rather use it as a means to get someplace.



Camel Head Clip Art, vector clip art, Clkr.com, November 13, 2007, <http://www.clker.com/clipart-3400.html>.

Akhlaq is a way to consider our relationship in and with the world and serves as a framework to understand beauty. From the root h-s-n, we get a new word for beauty: ihsan. To God belongs the most beautiful names (7:180, cf. 20:8), the Prophet is a beautiful role model (33:12), and the story of Hazrat Yusuf (as) is the most beautiful of stories (12:3). In all these examples, the idea of beauty is not just physical but moral and ethical. We are bettered by this beauty, not just as consumers but as producers of an aesthetic ethic, ihsan. We can create beautiful things, and we can understand these things in terms of aesthetic standards. The truly beautiful are informed by an ethic, so it is beautiful inside and out. The focus on the physical, the jamal, is the means to get to a deeper understanding of what beauty means. While we may be drawn to the sensory experience of attractiveness, staying at that level confuses the path with the destination. The jamal is the invitation to get to the ihsan.

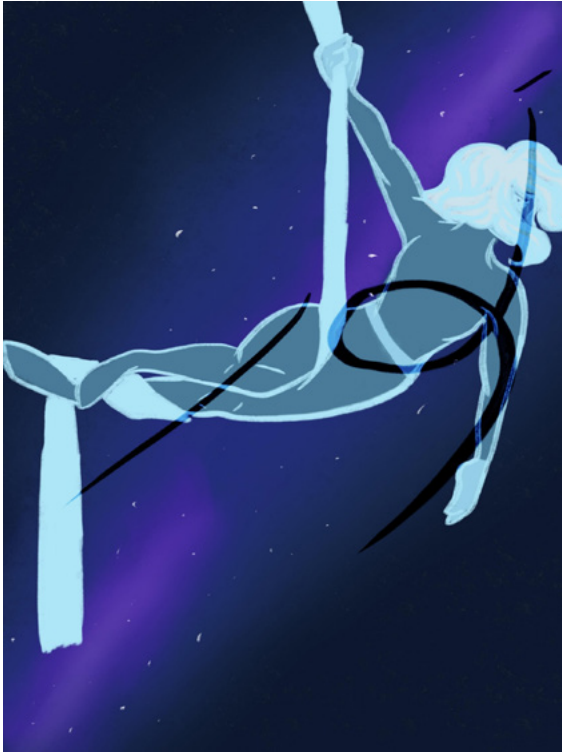


Coffin of Imam 'Ali, 1550-1560, Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 22 5/16 in. x 16 7/8 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,

One of my favorite pieces of art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is called "Coffin of Imam 'Ali," a folio from a *Falnama* (*The Book of Omens*) of Ja'far al-Sadiq.

I could focus on the line work, the richness of the colors, the composition, and intricate details that make this an attractive artwork. That type of description is *jamal*. The coffin on the camel tells us that we are at a funeral. The nimbus around the heads of the three figures tell us it is the funeral of an important religious person because the nimbus is a sign of sanctity. The description, the *jamal*, is thus very important to understanding the painting. One possible approach to understanding *ihsan* is to think about the fact that our religion should be manifest in this world and not aimed for the next world. The invitation is there for us to consider what this art is doing to engage aesthetic ethics.

There are two contemporary pieces of artwork that demonstrate how beauty collapses boundaries that I want to highlight. The first is a piece of digital artwork called *Nur*.



Nur by Sitarah Nur Rashid, ©2021, <https://ko-fi.com/GRIMBIRD>.

According to the artist, the artwork places a genderless figure in space among the stars, representing the universe. This positioning is meant to demonstrate that the greatest source of light is not the stars but the light (*nur*) within us that we cannot contain. We hold fast to the rope of Allah, and because God is neither male nor female, the figure who is suffused with the idea of Godliness transcends those boundaries. The *waw/u/3* in *nur* is half an infinity symbol to demonstrate the vastness within us and outside of us and to acknowledge that we can never reach that level of completeness.

The artist is thus using the *jamal* of the body to get us toward *ihsan*. The form of a physically developed body focuses the viewer on the meaning of the ideal human, which is often conveyed through physical perfection. Although the human is centered and takes up most of the canvas, by placing it in the vastness of the universe, the viewer is invited to think about the smallness of the body in contrast to the vastness they have through their *nur*. The silk the person is holding references the Qur'anic verse on holding fast to the rope of Allah, and in doing so many of the distinctions we make as people dissolve in the infinite nature of the Divine.

In premodern Muslim visual arts, the word was always central; illustrations were often related to literary texts. The next example demonstrates a modern take on the relationship between word and image.

The second piece, by Piper Rutchik, is a visual response to a short story about jinn called “The Congregation” by Kamila Shamsie in *The Djinn Falls in Love & Other Stories*.⁵



Art by Piper Rutchik, charcoal on paper, ©2022,
<https://www.piperjolieart.com>.

The story is about twins, one human and one jinn. Neither knows of each other’s existence until they are slightly older, and they “meet” in prayer. The visual response is about how thin and imagined the barriers between the seen and unseen worlds are.

The twins are eternally connected by magic, and that magic moves between them as they age and discover the beauties of each other’s worlds.

If, as Imam Ali (as) teaches, humans are created in a balance, then we should assume that all of creation is in a balance. The seen and the unseen world, the human and nonhuman creation, are all in a balance. Being in balance is not about being separate from each other but about existing in harmony. There are things that we should admire and seek to emulate from nonhuman creation, while also recognizing we have our own talents, skills, and beauty to offer. This artwork demonstrates that the false distinctions we create disappear when we realize we are connected through a greater power. The *jamal* of the human form is once more a vehicle to imagine a larger world and evoke the literary text. The image carries its own expression of *ihsan*, engaging with ideas of human dependency and relationship to all of creation, seen and unseen. It evokes the aesthetic ethic of the written word, which probes the complexities of human relations mediated by religion. The artwork is an expression of both/and thinking, seeking to move beyond constructed dichotomies, to get both *jamal* and *ihsan*.

CONCLUSION

Muslim cultures are full of beauty because the theologies of Islam are grounded in beauty. The beautiful acts are done by the Most Beautiful One, who creates. Thus, we are invited into that creation through worship, which reminds us of our relationship with the Divine and each other. It is through those relationships that we recognize what we owe each other. It is what we owe each other that is the basis of ethics because we are alike in Creation. Ethics are grounded in beauty and can be beautiful. The aesthetics that we generate have an ethical connection, and it is that aesthetic ethic that is *ihsan*. God is beautiful and loves beauty.

⁵ Mahvesh Murad and Jared Shurin, eds., *The Djinn Falls in Love & Other Stories* (New York: Solaris, 2017).