

Toward an Islamic Aesthetic Theory

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Introduction

Science has become a very narrow and qualified study of the universe. Its descriptions of reality are restricted to objective, publicly extended and impersonal notions. This characterization of reality is, in the Goethean sense, an utterly oppressive impasse to the subjective human condition.¹ Thus did Nietzsche exclaim, "the nihilistic consequences of our natural sciences from its pursuits . . . there follows ultimately a self-decomposition, a turning against itself."² One sees a disunited system of thought, where objective designs are studied using objective methods and tools, thereby leaving out many of the subjective and private characteristics of reality. How then can science claim to be a study of reality and the universe, when it does not have the tools to study even the most fundamental component of reality, the self? The gap between the subject and object was partly created by the Empiricist tradition and by Kant with his discussions on the "noumena" and "phenomena."³ This dualism within the western world-view has culminated in a very disunited and incoherent description of reality. In physics, efforts are being made to create a "theory of everything" (TOE), but it has been quite a task, because of the inherent dualism and lack of connection between ideas, both in the natural sciences and the social sciences.

As far as western art, it claims to be of an "absolute" and "universal" nature, so general as to include the whole universe, and beyond, within a single preview.⁴ Art relates to the subjective and inner feelings of an individual or a society at a particular time. As posited by the German Idealists, it actually submerges the object and the subject into one.⁵ But this bridge between the objective and the subjective is only an illusion whose disastrous effects can be seen in the modern conception of aesthetic autonomy. The negative production of an autonomous art form is a direct and implicit result of Kantian dualisms,⁶ which pervades the

western scheme and forms the basis of many of the dominant knowledge structures.

The Islamic paradigm, in contrast, is based upon *tawhid* (the absolute unity of God), a unifying thread that pervades all natural and social sciences. Art does not stand apart from science, as in the western notion of autonomous art. Islamic aesthetic theory does not have to contend with the autonomy of art because of its homogenous foundations, as we shall see below.

I shall discuss the Kantian aesthetic theory and how, from its awkward sense of the self, the theory of autonomous art was derived. I then contrast it with the Islamic point of view. The presentation will take on the form of a general survey of the implications of aesthetic autonomy and how the Islamic aesthete may respond. Contexts will be provided by the study itself, in that it will not be historical but rather more of an ideological contrast. In addition, we shall use Islamic epistemology and aesthetics as a critique of Kantian aesthetics. That is, we shall attempt to reconstruct the Kantian aesthetic and demonstrate how it negatively influenced the concept of aesthetic autonomy, which further influenced many abstractions, ideals, and contexts, such as identity of the self, morality, and epistemological and ontological concerns.

I did not claim that Kant was the sole origin of many of our modern ideas concerning the aesthetic—that would be absurd—however, he is an important figure in the study of western aesthetics. Many western abstractions and concepts of an aesthetic theory either were developed by Kant, were derived and inspired from his works, or were a negative reaction to Kant's aesthetic theories, as in the case of Nietzschean aesthetics.

Consequently, for the development and study of Islamic aesthetics in relation to western concepts, one must take into consideration Kantian positions on many issues presented in aesthetic theory. The primary focus of this paper will be the concept of aesthetic autonomy and how it developed out of Kantian dualisms, especially of the self in relation to nature. I also show that aesthetic autonomy and its implications in the field of the subject and the self are not Islamic notions. Finally, I present an Islamic solution to the problem, and identify some of the salient features of an Islamic aesthetic theory, which would then be used as a critique of the western ideas of aesthetics and philosophy of art.

In this paper I will not explicitly or directly argue against aesthetic autonomy, mainly because the issues and elements of this paper are of a different nature. However I do refer the reader to Noel Carroll's excellent, paper, "Moderate Moralism,"⁷ which discusses the arguments against autonomism. Rather, I argue that autonomy is morally dangerous to the self when contrasted with the Islamic aesthetic system.

From an analysis of Kantian aesthetic theories, I move to a short genealogical study of how Descartes's cogito revolutionized aesthetic

theories throughout history, including Kantian theories, which were directly affected in their dualistic grasp of phenomena. Along with these considerations, I deliberate upon Islamic aesthetics and epistemology and show how it differs or agrees with western theories. This entire contrast is premised on the belief that all civilizations consist of different worldviews that affect their conceptions and perceptions of truth and reality. Art is a universal configuration of certain pre-established and presupposed worldviews. These worldviews are developed and mediated by civilizations.⁸ Thus, the West has a valid and immensely developed concept of art, which is, in some regards, quite different from the Islamic form of art.

The topic of this paper was inspired by Lamyā al-Faruqī's identification of an Islamic aesthetic theory in her article, "Islamizing the Arts Disciplines," wherein she exhorts Muslim intellectuals to envisage the beginning of an Islamic philosophy of art (*falsafah al-funun*). Here is a modest effort to realize a part of her dream of a philosophy of Islamic art. This paper will attempt to identify and distinguish many of the unique and particular functions of an Islamic aesthetic theory, from which others may build upon in the future.

Kantian Inceptions of an Aesthetic Autonomy

Let us move to Kant's transcendental aesthetic theory and show how it relates to the Islamic notions of aesthetics. There have been many interpretations and expositions of Kant's *Critiques*¹⁰ and explanations of his aesthetic theory; but very few give a general and a broader significance to Kant's transcendental aesthetic theory. This paper will not deal with all the aspects of Kant's theory. Nevertheless, difficult as it is to summarize without assuming prior knowledge of his overall philosophical project, I intend to look at the aspects of the Kantian theory that will help us develop and understand how the Islamic aesthetic theory differs from the Kantian and western. Then, I shall relate Kantian aesthetic theory and the development of aesthetic autonomy. Thus, I shall restrict my discussion of Kant to the following important articulations: Kant's divisions of the objective and subjective and pleasurable and disagreeable art forms, in turn considering its implications in the spheres of music and color, which Kant believes to be the most inferior of the arts. Then, I show how music's inferior status, in the eyes of Kant, leads to aesthetic autonomy.

The problem that brings Kant to the shores of the aesthetic domain is the problem that was created by his separation of the world into the noumenal and phenomenal. The division of the object from the subject brought forth a dichotomy between the free and independent human individual and that of a determined and mechanically restricted existence of nature, in the purely Newtonian sense.¹¹ This gap was to be bridged

somehow, because without a connection, nature and man were never to converge upon the paths of existence and truth. If any science or knowledge scheme were ever to subsist, then this one fissure would have to be filled. Without a solution, Kant's entire philosophy would be redundant because no possible answer could then be found to his initial question: Is knowledge (science) possible? Kant's struggle to bridge this rift brought him to the abyss of aesthetics, which was then only a current philosophical problem, initiated earlier by Baumgarten and Hamann.¹² This Kantian separation between the free and independent human life and the mechanically determined nature and his lack of a viable solution later became manifested in the divorce between epistemology and ethics, of which it was further confirmed by a division between law, technology, and science.¹³

For Kant, art expressed the subject's desire to find and expose his/her own free natures into the orb of the object, thus rendering art something based and founded upon the subjective. This was done with the Kantian notion of the Idea,¹⁴ which was sort of like Schopenhauer's "Will," which pervaded every existence. This Idea was the purpose and meaning of the structures of nature and objects. For Kant, everything in the world progressed in a purposive way toward a certain end. This teleological Idea could be perceived by the intuitive and appreciative senses which bring about an aesthetic judgment: "This judgment relies upon the fact that the object is received in the subject in terms of 'feeling' and in terms of a harmonious play of understanding and imagination."¹⁵ Kantian concepts and categories like intuition, imagination, understanding, and apperception all provide for an experience of the Idea, thus its complete subjective nature. Without knowledge of the thing-in-itself, we as subject are left to devise a connection with the object that formulates itself into an "Idea," which is representative of a formal structure "outside." Here representations of the Idea merely rely upon the concreteness, or the formality of the object, without which no easy representation can be possible.

Now the notion of freedom comes along with the taxonomy of imagination and understanding. The imagination is free to consider and do what it wills of the Idea.¹⁶ This freedom of imagination allows the subject to further his/her considerations of a cognitive and noncognitive claim over nature. Some very crucial distinctions are made by Kant that allow us to understand how this freedom of our categories arrives at some structured satisfaction (or aesthetic pleasure for the subject).

The distinction is made between two reactions to objects: On the one hand, there are sensations we receive purely from the sensual intuition of an object. This is a pure consideration of the object for its sensation and the enjoyment that the object may give through one's senses alone. Weatherston calls this sort of sensation the agreeableness of an object.¹⁷

It should be noted that this agreeableness is entirely contingent upon individual inclinations. The second form of pleasure, which is distinguished from the first, is what we shall call beauty or disinterested pleasure¹⁸ and is based upon the cognition we receive from the form of an object. Regardless of the object's charm and enjoyment that it may deliver to the senses, its beauty is based upon the form it presents to our understanding. Beauty is brought about by a purely formal sense that touches our rationale and intellect.

Beauty is further divided into two other categories: free and adherent beauty,¹⁹ both of which are subjective characteristics of beauty itself. The former is the "free hand" consideration of beauty, but without attention to the cognitive and purposive ends of the object and without deliberation upon the charm and enjoyment an object may provide the subject. Adherent beauty refers to the attention paid to the concepts and purposes that an object of beauty may serve to the cognition. Thus, adherent beauty embodies the aesthetic Idea.²⁰

Music as Art in Kantian Aesthetics

In Kant's aesthetic categories, music is the lowest of all art forms, even lower than the telling of a joke. The reason Kant gives such a low consideration to music can be easily determined when we consider it in the matrix of the above two categories. Compared to other art, music and color are aesthetic artifacts that are hard to categorize under the rubric of the above two general categories. Other art forms have formal structures that are easily identified as defined figures that express a certain concrete and thus a representational form. But with music and color, this is not the case. They seem not to represent any form or design of a higher order that prick our cognitive minds. Are they beautiful art forms that extend their "forms" to our mind, or are they just sensually pleasurable, offering our minds charm and enjoyment for their own sake?

To answer the above question, one would have to be able to place music in one of the categories of satisfaction mentioned above. Since most music (and colors) are abstract and nonrepresentational,²¹ and considering that the division of satisfaction into the agreeable and beautiful is based upon the concrete representation of the subject's "Idea" of the object, we are left with no choice but to place music into the realm of the agreeable.²² If music is placed into the agreeable form of satisfaction, then music has nothing to say to the intellect, nor can it represent the "idea" of an object. Thus it becomes nonpurposive in its appeal.

However, it can be strongly argued that music does represent the Idea, maybe even more eloquently than any other art form. For example, as Schopenhauer would have it, music is the articulation of the "Will," the very conceptless language of the Idea itself, thus making music the high-

est of all art forms. Even Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, discusses the possibility of music or any other abstract form of art as being the highest of all forms of art. Thus for Kierkegaard, Mozart's opera *Don Juan* was the greatest achievement in the arts, because of its pure abstractness.²³ If the abstractness of the art form makes art more beautiful and expressive, then it would appear that Kant was quite wrong. We have before us a counterexample to Kant's critique of judgment.

Furthermore, if music is a powerful tool for the conjuring of different emotions and the "playing" of the mind, then how can it be considered such a low and base form of art? Does this quality not make music an important form of art, especially if art's focal purpose is to make man conscious of himself through his feelings and emotions, as Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali tried to establish? Both of them divided music into two parts: the formal material structure of the sound itself and its spiritual structure, the latter being conducive to pure spiritual and personal growth. Consequently, the problem arises: If music is really such an important form of art, and the Kantian aesthetic seems to deny its importance, then would art really have to represent and create cognitively moral emotions to be art? Does art really need to fuse the subject within the object, with the force and power of representation?

"The point about music for these thinkers," Bowie states, "is that, although it is sensuous, it does not necessarily represent anything. As such, it may be understood as 'representing' what cannot be represented in the subject, the supersensuous basis of subjectivity which Kant's philosophy cannot articulate."²⁴ For Kant, music was an art of empty formalisms and of nonrepresentational forms, condemning music to a lower form of art that acted as the "language of emotions." But does art have to be representational and structured to be great? Do morality, cognition, understanding, purpose, and teleological ideals, all of which Kant believed add purpose and meaning to art, have to be included in art and beauty? These qualities do not exist in the domains of music. Here lies the emergence of a divorce and separation between morality, purpose, and meaning on the one hand, and nonrepresentation, noncognitive, and the immoral, on the other. In other words, aesthetic success is not in the formal structures, representations of an object, and its moral capacities of purpose, but in its sensuousness and feeling. Woe to Kant: "I love him who willeth the creation of something beyond himself and then perisheth," thus spoke Zarathustra.

Kant accidentally lit the match, Hegel set the wick aflame, Nietzsche placed the dynamite on the bundle of morals, and modernism has watched the explosion and destruction of these morals. The result: Art has become not a tool to self-understanding, self-consciousness, and human development, as Kant wished it; rather, art has become something that is relished by the senses and glorified by the debased sentiments of

humankind. Humans are now justified in creating images of immoral and brutally obscene organisms of art that do not teach or educate the masses about the importance of moral considerations. For the autonomist moral education is invalid, because morals have no authority over the aesthetic modes of an art form.²⁵

We also see many forms of "abstract" art which have no apparent meaning or any moral or real significance to human life except the sensational emotions that they evoke by the different uses and positionings of the various colors. We see "abstract" objects being distorted and deformed to bring out our emotional responses and not our moral and cognitive replies. The deformed and distorted creations of the abstract artists do not represent any reality, yet they do create a reality of their own. (This art form found its greatest manifestation in the distortion and deformation of the world during World War I and II.) We find literature and drama being diseased by the lack of moral consideration in their productions and writings,²⁶ where even excessive violence and immoral acts are part and parcel of a "successful" art piece.²⁷

All these illusions of aesthetic productions are not in any way without criticism from the young and old. Many people actually despise and abhor many of these immoral and senseless forms of art. For example, people stand up against the violence portrayed in movies; parents prevent their children from watching certain types of obscene shows. These expressions of repulsion and repugnance arise not only from people's moral voice but also from the natural dispositions that make them human. Thus aesthetic autonomy does not result in a description and explanation of human nature. If a certain idea or concept is against human nature, it shall never last long. Now we see in contemporary times a return to the grand moral sublimity of the forgotten.²⁸

Autonomy in Art

Autonomy of art refers to that art or aesthetic expression that is strictly isolated and independent of all other knowledge forms and disciplines.²⁹ First, I will briefly consider the ontological aspects of autonomous art and then move on to the epistemological aspects. Ontologically, autonomists contend that art should exist only for its own sake. Art has intrinsic values that are enough to warrant its own existence, which also justifies its own perception of "truth" and "reality" *per se*. This existence, then, does not need any extrinsic entities for it to be art, meaning that it does not need to be judged, discussed, or evaluated by "other social realms which pursue cognitive, political or moral value."³⁰ Nor does art need to judge or evaluate these disciplines for it to vindicate itself. It then follows that the content of art does not really matter. It is the form and design of the art piece that is relevant to its validi-

ty,³¹ for when art is judged by other disciplines of truth, it is evaluated according to its content, i.e., the messages and the information that it provides within its content. This is not the case, however, mainly because of the assumed autonomy of information and meaning that art embodies.

Furthermore, autonomists assert that art cannot be judged at all by any discipline other than itself. So how does art judge itself? It takes its own form and design and evaluates them according to other established art forms. That is, art judges itself according to its own form and structure.³² Second, art judges itself on how well it aesthetically “absorbs” an individual. This absorption—the soaking in of the form, structure, and design of a piece—is important to the aesthetic flavor and success. So what is important is not the content of the art piece, but only the form, because art judges itself and others may judge it by the form.

If we apply the above ontology of art to the realms of religion and ethics, we will find some very disturbing results. Ethics, which in the Islamic sense is equivalent to religion,³³ has no form or design structures. Consequently, ethics and religion do not possess any artistic form, making ethics and religion not applicable to the arts. In other words, religion cannot be depicted in a universal form; thus, it cannot be represented, so to speak, in the arts. One may argue, however, that religion does have a representational universal form in the arts, some of which may be, for example, the depiction of struggle and patience. But as Kierkegaard rightly notes, these temporal concepts of struggle and patience are antithetical to art’s atemporal and universal nature.³⁴ Not only does morality have nothing to do with art, because its want in form, but morality cannot be universally applied to all art.³⁵ Therefore, ethics and religion have nothing to do with art.

Epistemologically speaking, autonomous art has a truth system that is independent of considerations and influences of other truth valuing systems. This is impending, as in the case of ethical and religious truths. Aesthetic autonomy possesses its own truth values independent of all other disciplines, including the truths of ethics and religion. This means that for an art piece to be successful, its truths need not be ethically or religiously directed. So an art piece that is immoral and unethical may still be considered aesthetically successful.³⁶ This renders art very dangerous to society at large. In the Platonic sense this means art can be used to manipulate the masses for any reason at all, ethical or otherwise.³⁷

Moreover, epistemological considerations of the aesthetic autonomy of art show that it is based on relative and antifoundational postulates and premises. These tendencies of aesthetic autonomy have grave effects on the “absolute” nature of truth and reality. If art is a tool that expresses truths, then how does it go about doing this when it believes truths to be of a relative nature? Thus, judging an art piece according to its “truth” content and form is very difficult. In the case of aesthetic autonomy,

evaluation of an art piece by truth content and form is impossible because of the relative nature of truth. Evaluation is not formalized or structured upon any absolute basis, but rather only upon certain other preconditions of art, such as sensuality, visualization, audio representation, and other experiences. As a result the whole program becomes an antimoral *modus operandi*.

Upon further consideration these inconsistencies bring about practical implications that create confusion and doubt in the truth of reality. Confusion is a consequence of the relativism that autonomous art forges, making way for a forlorn existential system to dawn upon reality. Without an absolute and transcendent basis for art (or any other discipline for that matter), systems end up having no particular objective or goal, thereby causing an inextricable system to develop. This can be seen in the sociology of knowledge programs that were initiated by Karl Mannheim without any Absolute or a priori postulates, making it "existentially conditioned." Ultimately, making validity of reality statements becomes impossible.³⁸

The Islamic Perspective

Islamic art is not autonomous in any sense of the word. Islamic aesthetics is totally coherent and involved with the values and judgments of science, law, socioeconomic conditions, religion, morality, and other knowledge schemes.³⁹ This unification finds its source in *tawhid*, which directs and integrates all knowledge into one aggregate whole, each finding consistency in the other. This Absolute gives direction and control to all subjective and/or objective dictations of reality. Without this Absolute and focal point, no complete conception of reality can be found. This center is established within the universal dimensions of the Qur'an and the Sunnah, whereby the Islamic paradigm rests on an a priori substructure that pervades and directs the a posteriori superstructure which finds its functional nature in the *ijtihadi* precepts.⁴⁰ This is what Masudul Alam Choudhury calls his epistemological-ontological (E-O) simultaneity principle.⁴¹ Extending these abstract notions into an Islamic theory of aesthetics, we find that the absolute and a priori postulates guide an artwork in becoming Islamically aesthetic and pleasing to the moral sense and even engaging to the sensual senses. At the same time the a posteriori finds its function when the artist uses his/her own intuitions and creative skills to develop an artwork.

The Absolute is directly from God, and it relates to humans what is needed for their satisfaction and for their successful development. It dictates to humans what is required of both the soul and of the body, making the absolute postulate of the Islamic paradigm something that considers both the spiritual and material realms of existence. Both realms

thus gain expression in the functional expositions of an art piece, be it drama or a painting. Upon subsequent deliberation upon Islamic aesthetic theory, one finds that the Absolute is inscribed upon the infinite continuum, creating in the finite human creations of an art piece, inscriptions of infinite acts and conveyances. So, in the Islamic works of art one finds the descriptions of infinite patterns,⁴² which seem to flow upon eternal rivers finding their sources among the sublime. These seem to extend beyond the finite plains of vision and sow seeds of continuous infinities upon the impressionable unconscious and conscious mind of the beholder. Making these realizations and sensations of infinity, the real and grand aesthetic experience that each human heart yearns for and desperately longs for in its continual projections upon the human soul. All this infinity extends from the Absolute a priori sources of Islamic art. Thus does God say: "Those who believe, and whose hearts find satisfaction in the remembrance of Allah: for without doubt in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find satisfaction" (Qur'an, 13:28).

In the Islamic paradigm, the end of art is the manifestation of the Absolute Truth.⁴³ This Absolute Truth is nothing but God Himself. God is thus, the very beginning of art, as its postulate, and its end, as in its adornment. However, one must heed the fact that the Absolute Truth is not to be fully manifested within a finite realm, such as this universe. God is beyond space and time, above this universe and not within it. Only when time and space are extended infinitely will God be manifested. The moment when time and space and other finite dimensions are extended is called the *akhirah*.⁴⁴ Within this world humans shall never be able to realize all of the Absolute, rather only as much as God wills. Therefore, there seems to be a moment to moment realization of the truth as time increases, making it a dynamic process.⁴⁵ But truth is never to be attained in its fullest splendor, except at the end of time itself, wherein Truth itself shall be known.

This is in total contradiction to the Kantian notion of optimal states of truth, that finds its expression in most of the western sciences: that all truth is out there and can be achieved and subdued in its fullest quintessence and that nothing can hinder this struggle.⁴⁶ Choudhury has a very interesting discussion of the optimal states of knowledge and truth, wherein he concludes: "the neo-classical world-view is also non-discursive, non-process and non-dialectic in essence. In it, knowledge is incapable of being formed, for it already exists in its optimal state. Hence, the universe around complying to the neo-classical world-view must necessarily behave optimally, without chances of conflict and shortfalls remaining."⁴⁷

Given all of the above, it would seem appropriate to say that Islamic art expresses nothing but the pure submission to the Absolute One God. This view may be right, but it seems much too general to do any real

philosophical work. Islamic art can also be defined as the expression of the Islamic, or Muslim, worldview.⁴⁸ This latter definition is ultimately the same as the first, because the Islamic worldview is based upon the pleasure of the Absolute One. However, this latter definition further articulates a refined approach to aesthetics and Islamic art, in that it presupposes a sort of truth tracking and information carrying ability in the arts. In other words, Islamic art does carry information and truths concerning the Islamic worldview, its approach to the universe, and its creator. In addition, it may be judged to be aesthetically successful if it conforms to the Islamic worldview. On the other hand, if the piece does not conform to the Islamic worldview, then that piece is regarded as artistically unsuccessful. The Islamic worldview does presuppose the existence of Islamic values that must be maintained and upheld. These values are given to us not only by our rational abilities, but also, and more importantly, through revelation. Revelation, or the Qur'an and Sunnah, contain the injunctions, statements, propositions, and descriptions of the Absolute Will that help give us direction with regards to reality and ourselves. Therefore, if the injunctions, statements, propositions, and descriptions of the revelation are found expressively lacking in an art-piece, that piece is judged as Islamically unsuccessful. And if a piece contains an expression of these injunctions, statements, propositions, and descriptions, then that piece is found to be Islamically successful. Thus, unlike Kant, the aesthetic judgment that Islam passes upon artwork is determined not by the self alone, but also by a purely objective source, i.e., revelation. Kant also tried, unsuccessfully, to place beauty in the rubrics of the intellect. But as we have thus far seen, Islam places beauty not only in the rubric of the intellect, but also in the realm of revelation and truth. This means that Islamic art does not have an independent existence from revelation and truth but rather is an integral part of them. That is why Islamic art, as described above, also does not adhere to any sort of aesthetic autonomy. By its very nature Islamic art is related to the Muslim's worldview, and this means that the art must say something, or be meaningful, and that it must also be a sort of reminder to the audience. This, further, presupposes that there is an author of a piece, but the author does not become as important to the artistic product, as would the reception of the piece by the ummah. The author, or the artist, may still be recognized, but once the artistic product has been "given" to the ummah as a whole, then that product is considered as the product of the Islamic milieu or worldview. This should not be regarded as the negation of the author; rather, the authorship is given to the ummah as whole, and the center is not in the author or artist, but in the Absolute upon which the piece is built.

Moreover, these injunctions, statements, propositions, and descriptions should be taken as a whole, so that the spirit of the revelation may be able

to perform as the Islamic “worldview,” which rightly determines the success of the art. In other words, I have described a worldview as a collection of injunctions, statements, propositions and descriptions, when taken all together help us to see the Islamic worldview. Obviously there may be different interpretations of the various injunctions, statements, propositions, and descriptions of the Qur’an and the Sunnah, which will eventually be reflected in their respective worldviews, and thus in their different art forms. But what makes these various art forms Islamic is their basic agreement in the fundamental absolute (*qati*) tenants, injunctions, statements, propositions, and descriptions of the revelation, or even in their common Islamic “spirit.”

Thus far we have been indirectly attacking Kant’s rejection of abstract art as aesthetically beautiful. This discussion of worldviews and common Islamic spirits being reflected in an art piece presupposes a mode of representation. The Islamic message, worldview, and spirit can be portrayed literally, but this would not do justice to the universal nature of art. The Islamic message, worldview, and spirit can also be represented in a concrete form, but this may not capture the complete understanding. Also, from the perspective of the audience receiving the art, the message, worldview, and spirit of the piece may be presented literally, but this would limit the value of the educational, knowledge bearing, truth bearing, and reminding power that it may potentially have. In other words, the audience will be left with an incomplete conception of its worldview. Therefore, the best way to represent abstract concepts such as worldviews is to use abstract vehicles of representation, as S. Parvez Manzoor eloquently puts it, the living God, though not an abstraction, none the less, is approached in Islamic thought in the most abstract way. “There is no other divinity besides God” is the most abstract statement possible about a Positive, Living Deity. Just as Islam does not clothe its Deity in any mythological/anthropomorphic garb, so was the art of Islam bound not to accept the representational imagery, and least of all, the humanistic one. The art that such an Islamic passion for abstraction would favor would be a non-representational, abstract one.⁴⁹

This may also explain why calligraphy and poetry were the highest of all art forms in the Islamic world. Music, however, never reached complete popularity as one of the main representatives of the Islamic worldview, because of its doubtful validity.

So far we have been thinking about Islamic art and what it means in light of the above definition. But what about beauty in Islamic art? What makes an Islamic piece beautiful? In the Kantian sense, beauty is that which gives us a sort of intellectual satisfaction, given to us through the object’s pure form and structure. This form and intellectual structure that our minds attribute to the object lead us to the determination of some sort of an aesthetic Idea. All this remains in the subject’s sensual perceptions,

admixed with the categories of the intellect. Thus even the Idea is a product of the subject's mind and not of the object itself. In the Islamic sense, however, beauty is not only determined by the individual's subjective intellectual categories but also by that of revelation, truth, and goodness, the latter determinants being from the external categories. It may be argued, however, that truth and goodness cannot be considered external categories, because they are determined by the subjective. The Islamic response to this is that truth and goodness themselves are determined by revelation, and since revelation is considered external source, from God, truth and goodness here also become an external categories. Hence, an object is beautiful if it conforms to the standards of beauty given to us by the intellect, revelation, goodness, and truth. It is important to note, however, that the "categories" of intellect, truth, and goodness are not to be taken independent of revelation. In my view, all three are directly or indirectly related in some way to revelation. This makes revelation the primary source in the judgment of beauty. Each of these four when taken separately, may be directed and informed by the other, though, they never claim complete independence from the other, save revelation, because of its primacy and infallibility.

To further our analysis, let us see how revelation may actually determine beauty. By revelation, I mean the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and their collective spirit and message. In this analysis I will try to restrict myself to the revelation's ethical injunctions concerning action (*hukum shari'*, rulings of the Sacred Law). Let me start with the general proposition that anything that is *halal* (allowed) is beautiful, and anything that is *haram* (prohibited) is not beautiful. Here I am intentionally leaving out the concepts of *mubah* (permissible) or *makruh* (disapproved) and *mandub* (recommended), because this would just add complexity to the simplicity of my point. If the above formulation of beauty is true, then it would seem that beauty can only be known through revelation, since the *halal* and the *haram* are only known through revelation themselves. Here again, someone might say that the *halal* and the *haram* can also be known through the intellect. I will return to this point later. If it is true that beauty can be known only through revelation and thus given to us by God, then beauty is not knowable in any other way. This division further presupposes that the *halal* is good and thus beautiful and that the *haram* is bad and thus ugly. Two major counterpoints could be made: (1) The *haram* can conceivably be beautiful (thus the temptation and desire for the *haram*); and (2) beauty (as goodness) can be known independently of revelation (i.e., through the intellect).

I concede the point that the *haram* could conceivably be regarded as beautiful. This concern, however, may be explained by following the division made by al-Ghazali between beauty in its outer form and beauty in its inner form. Al-Ghazali says, "the beauty of the outer form which

is seen with the bodily eye can be experienced even by children and animals, . . . while the beauty of the inner form can only be perceived by the eye of the "heart" and the light of inner vision of man alone."⁵⁰ This division of beauty into two components reflects the respective secular approach to beauty, while the inner eye reveals the religious tone of beauty. The *haram* may seem beautiful in its outer appearance, but when looked at with the religious inner eye of man, this so-called beauty degrades into something against the Absolute, making it something repugnant to the heart of man. Unlike Kant, though, this division of beauty is not based only upon the mind of man, but also upon his *fitra* and his revelatory sensibilities. As the Prophet is believed to have said, "God is beautiful and He loves beauty."

To address the second of the two concerns presented above, I will look at what al-Ghazali has to say with regards to independent human determination of what is good and evil, and hence, of what is beautiful and ugly. Al-Ghazali shows in his great work *Al-Mustasfa* that human intellect is incapable of discerning between good and evil. Al-Ghazali reasons that the intellect alone cannot find the command of the Shari'ah (*ahkam al-shari'ah*). His motivation for this argument is a rejoinder to the Mu'tazalites, who believed in the supremacy of reason. But here I shall use it for addressing the second concern and for contrasting it to Kant's conception of the good and beautiful. Al-Ghazali bases his contentions upon firm revelatory verses and anecdotes. Then, he tries to define the terms *husn* as "good" and *qubh* as "evil" within the framework of three definitions. Finally, he gives an example of our inability to determine what is good and what is evil. The paradigm example for al-Ghazali is that of lying. Lying is conventionally known as an evil act. But what happens if a prophet is being pursued by an assassin. The assassin asks X of the prophet's whereabouts, but X lies in order to beguile the killer and safeguard the prophet. "Al-Ghazali argues that this lying is *hasan* because of the good derived from it, i.e., the saving of the prophet's life. Indeed it is more than good. It is obligatory upon the person who knows the prophet's whereabouts. In fact, he sins and disobeys if he does not lie."⁵¹

Therefore, even evil becomes good in the foregoing example. In other words, reason declares an act good instead of evil relative to a certain condition and situation. How then can reason determine good and evil, when they seem to be relative and not always consistent?⁵² Consequently, the only true and assiduous way to determine the truth is through revelation, because its source is from God, who is All-Knowing and All-Wise. Revelation itself expresses when to use and not to use reason, thereby qualifying the usage of reason when needed. Further, in order to safeguard morality from becoming a relative and an existential field of study, we must find some absolute foundations to anchor these

beliefs. In the Islamic sense, these Absolute foundations are nothing but the dictation of God as revealed in the Qur'an and expressed in the Sunnah. So now, if good and evil are not independent of revelatory determinations, then beauty and ugliness, both being related directly to the good and evil, as shown above, are not independent of revelatory judgment.

This, I feel, is also an important contrast between Kantian aesthetic theory and the Islamic. That is, for Kant, morality established in art some sort of purpose and meaning of a higher status, which increased the human reverence for and awe of art for its moral and intellectual beauty. Islamic theory is in total agreement with this. But instead of basing these morals upon the intellect of humankind, Islam bases these morals upon the infinite and absolute existence of God. Unlike western aesthetics, Islamic epistemology is based upon infinite expressions of an Absolute nature. Morality adds purpose and meaning to an art piece; morality is an very important concept in the Islamic aesthetic system. As the Prophet said about poetry, which may be extended to our general discussion above: "it is a speech, whatever is in agreement with the truth is beautiful; whatever is not, lacks any goodness."⁵³

Kantian and Islamic Views and Implications

In this section I would like to show the genealogical steps to the separation of the objective and the subjective, which occasioned Kant to formulate an art that was independent and intrinsically valued in itself. This I will do by showing how Descartes's structuring of the world according to the "I" or the self have caused many rifts and problems. I will also show how the implications of Descartes via Kantian theories have caused many dualisms, and I comment upon the Islamic solutions and views of a possible Islamic aesthetics and a theory of the self.

The epistemological and ontological positions of the Islamic worldview do not warrant or result in such harmful and deleterious art structures. When we compare the Kantian array with that of the Islamic contentions, we find that the Islamic views of art stem from something completely different than Kant's. For Kant, undoubtedly, man is the end and not the means to anything except the development and enhancement of himself; this was the focus of all his subsequent thought. As in the Greek expressions of anthropomorphic deities, one finds Kantian ideals place man as the head and end of all creation. Later, as a reaction against Kant's rationally centered philosophy, German Romanticism based itself upon the absoluteness of the subject, and its "infinite" emotional abyss. Little did the Romanticists know that they were still basing their philosophy upon the very same foundations that Kant had, i.e., man. This anthropocentric philosophy culminated in Nietzsche's extreme, the

Superman, and made him eternal with his melodious songs of the Eternal Recurrence.⁵⁴

Islam on the other hand points not to man as the be-all and end-all. Rather, the Islamic basis for all is not finite, limited, and imperfect entities, but upon the sublime grandeur⁵⁵ of the highest and transcendent being, God Himself.⁵⁶ God is the end, and man's means are His pleasure and His satisfaction.⁵⁷ This is the lofty and elevated disposition of the Islamic paradigm, while the western paradigm is grounded in the diffident and limited existence called humankind.

"I think, therefore I am," Descartes's cogito, was the kindle that began the intellectual pursuit of basing man at the center. Later this consummated into the Kantian dualisms present in his separation between the objective and the subjective, which further led, as we saw above, to aesthetic autonomies. For Descartes, the problems that were caused by the separation of the objective and the subjective were solved by his addition of God into his philosophical system. Kant, on the other hand, tried to solve these problems without a God. From then on mankind has been diverted and distracted from the reality and truth of things.

This variance in a priori and absolutes makes all the difference in the world. From the time of Descartes, Kant, Fichte, Holderlin, Novalis, Schelling, and finally Hegel (with his descriptions of the end of art), we find desperate deliberations upon the breaking up of the "I" or the self into components and subentities that finally took root in itself, and which bred all the contradictions and paradoxes that one can think of.⁵⁸ How can the "I" be divided? How can the "I" be separated from itself? How can the "I" reflect upon itself? These questions, which were a direct result of making man the end and center of knowledge, have preoccupied minds of the highest status without avail.

Another very important problem that arises out of the paradox of the self is the impossibility of the subject to step outside of himself or herself in order to realize the existence of the world through an external verification of reality. Even if the subject could become "external," and look at reality from the vantage point of both the subject's own individual perception of the world and the real actual world, it would still be nothing more than a perception of the subject itself. This impossibility has caused much disturbance in our understanding of objects and reality. It has created riddles in our understanding of perceptual realisms and phenomenals. Where does one end and the other start? How far can we know things-in-themselves? Or are there things in the world at all? When taken from the point of the "I," these questions, and our understanding of perception and objects, become an almost impossible task.

In Islam God is the Absolute, and highest of all thoughts are the thoughts of Him. Thoughts of Him do not require any separation of the "I," only a willingness to transcend oneself into a higher plain of thought

and contemplation. The separation of the "I" does not occur in this scheme, because of the mind's thoughts of the One and only, causing unification of the mind's thoughts with regards the whole. This, however, does not mean that the self is forgotten or is alienated; the self is being confirmed with certainty by God. We do not confirm ourselves, but we are confirmed. This contemplation does not disregard reason and intellect but rather utilizes it and nurtures it. In addition, we find great scholars like al-Ghazali showing in the eleventh century that basing knowledge upon the senses and the rationale is insufficient and a fragile foundation for knowledge. On the other hand, having an objective foundation for knowledge, reason, and the senses safeguards human endeavors from becoming worthless cyclic speculations about the phenomena around us.⁵⁹

Some might remark: "art is purely a subjective description of reality. How then, can you assert that Islamic art can be universal and a unified portrayal of reality?" I would respond very briefly as follows. We have established above that the Islamic worldview is grounded and unified upon divine sources that characterize and shape the reality for a Muslim. Once this postulation is clear, we can then move on and assert that Islamic arts and sciences are based upon what I shall call Divine Realism. This is where the existence of the universe and all it contains is described and confirmed through the Qur'an and the Sunnah to us by God Himself. This description and confirmation are external to the individual and not subjective. Indeed, it is an objective description of reality by an external force, i.e., God, via revelation. However, interpretation of the external and objective revelation is subjective, in that revelation is considered by an individual who has certain presupposed ideas and notions that influence his/her *ta'wil* (interpretation). But the individual must distinguish between those verses that allow for interpretation (*zanni*) and those that are clearcut, unambiguous, unequivocal, and so definite that there is no room for interpretation (i.e., *qati'* verses).

Divine Realism is also extended into the spheres of Islamic art and aesthetic theories. How this works in the Islamic arts is that a Muslim artist is directed by the a priori set, which consists of the divine sources or the revelation. The revelation describes, confirms, and informs the artist, a priori, that a world does in reality exist and that these noumena are described and demarcated to us by the divine sources. That is the objective half of the coin. The other side of the coin is the subjective half, where the artist considers the reality around him/her through the lens of Divine Realism and through the a posteriori considerations of the world as object. The individual extends his/her cognitive reflections, emotional biases, psychological influences, perceptual sensations, and intellect upon the object at hand, thus subjectifying the object. This may be how

Divine Realism attempts to bridge the gap between the phenomena and the noumena.

Furthermore, in the Islamic theory of art we can step outside of ourselves; that is, we can look from the "external" vantage point. This can only be done when we have revelation, which by its nature is transcendent and "external" from our experiences of reality. Revelation, when made the center of our reality, allows us to look at ourselves from outside, and thereby allows us to verify existence and perception. We do not find problems in the verification and affirmation of the existence of ourselves and of the various sorts of objects the world is made of. We are, thus, not led to extreme notions of Idealism, which would ultimately lead to some sort of pantheism, nor to the other extreme of Realism, which ultimately would lead to materialism and/or reductionism. The Islamic theory finds itself in the middle and affirms the existence of reality and physical objects. It also provides constraints of how far we can go when it comes to the material world, by showing us that the material is only temporary and limited.

Kant's work on this separation between the object and the subject brought forth many unsolved problems that required a God, which he would ultimately ignore in his paradoxically acclaimed "transcendental" philosophy. It had brought him to a junction between the free human existence and a mechanically determined natural existence. The only thing for Kant that could fill this gap, without God, was an aesthetic theory. This aesthetic theory was based upon the human intellect, which made for a very weak grounding. So weak was this grounding that it led to divisions between the mechanical and free, between the object and subject, between the representational and the meaningless.

Notes

1. As shown by Goethe's discussion of a "prosaic age," or the "age of talent," where in the human subjective, personal sentiments of reality are absent.
2. Enrich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 7.
3. Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 18.
4. Many thinkers have expressed this idea, including Schopenhauer and Benedetto Croce in his famous *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic* (1902).
5. Peter Szondi says of German Idealism: "One could say crudely that the philosophy of German Idealism tried to win back via the path of speculation what Kant's criticism had to renounce: the unity of subject and the object, of mind (Geist) and nature."
6. There is a brief discussion of this in Bowie, 30.
7. Noel Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, no. 2 (July 1996).
8. Alparslan Acikgenc, "A Concept of Philosophy in the Qur'anic Context," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1994).
9. Lamia al-Faruqi.
10. Kant has written three *Critiques*; *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgment*. It is in his *Critique of Judgment* that he develops his whole aesthetic theory.

11. This was a very important problem that required a solution in Kant's philosophy. Bowie, 16–17.
12. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, part 1 (1750), part 2 (1758). Hamann, *Aesthetica in nuce* (1762).
13. Attempts have been made to combine and unify ethics and technology by some thinkers like Mauss and Foucault, who have tried to show that technology (technique, in French) has manifestations not only in objects and machines but also in the human subjects themselves. See Michel Foucault, "Subjective et veritire, 1980-81," in *Resume des Cours, 1970-1982* (Paris: Julliard, 1989).
14. Bowie, 24.
15. *Ibid.*, 28.
16. *Ibid.*, 29.
17. Martin Weatherston, "Kant's Assessment of Music in the Critique of Judgment," *The British Journal of Aesthetic* 36, no. 1 (January 1996): 56.
18. Weatherston, 56. Kant's *Kritik of Judgment* (London: MacMillan, 1892), 55–57.
19. Kant, *Kritik of Judgment*, 81–84, 99.
20. Kant, *Kritik of Judgment*, 235.
21. The claim that music is nonrepresentational could be disputed. But Kant seems to think that music is abstract and nonrepresentation, so we will assume this throughout.
22. It can be argued, as Kant attempts to, that music can also fall into the category of free beauty. However, his argument for this position ultimately states that music is only agreeable.
23. Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Swenson (New Jersey, 1959), 55-59.
24. Bowie, 29.
25. Schiller expresses great consideration for the usage of art as "aesthetic education," because art expresses ideas that reason and demonstration by empirical methods cannot signify. Schiller gets this directly from the Kantian ideas in general. Kant states how the poets created ideas of "the invisible Being, the realm of the blessed, hell, eternity, the creation," Bowie, 30 (*Kritik of Judgment*, 194).
26. Zafar Hussain shows in his *The Reconstruction of Islamic Society* (Lahore: Ferozsons, 1992), how Islam should deal with moral problems like these in the arts.
27. A good parody of the extreme violence in the movies and on TV, is made by the movie *Pulp Fiction*, which addresses the fanatic use of violence and obscenity.
28. It seems as if art is, slowly, moving back into the folds of morality: "although a great deal of contemporary criticism presupposes that art can be discussed and even evaluated morally, little effort has been devoted to working out the philosophical foundations of moral criticism" (Carroll, 224).
29. *Ibid.*, 224–225.
30. *Ibid.*, 224.
31. Andrew Bowie, "Autonomy, Aesthetic," in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. David Cooper (Cambridge, 1992), 33–37.
32. This is important to understand, because the evaluation of an art work is fundamental to its success and the "truth-value" that it may carry. Judging a piece to art itself, and not to reality "outside," results in total isolation and autonomy from all resources and centers of truth and validity, which autonomous art seems to "transcend." In Islam, art is judged and evaluated by the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, and it is judged by reality and the *fitrah*.
33. What I mean by this assertion is that ethics and morality are both mutually united and combined into the religious. That is, the religion of Islam does not separate itself into ethics, morality, and religion. But are all one and the same. Thus does the religion of Islam dictate to us what is ethically and morally right or wrong.
34. George Pattison, "Kierkegaard: Aesthetics and 'The Aesthetic,'" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, no. 2 (April 1991).
35. Carroll, 225.
36. A perfect example of this view is Marcel Duchamp's signing and exhibiting of a urinal. Is the urinal an expression of something aesthetically beyond experience, or is it just a urinal?
37. This brings us to another topic that, unfortunately, cannot be discussed in this paper: art and the power of advertisements. Here, art becomes something of a capitalist showpiece that requires monetary value alone, thus making it into a commodity. This

reduces art to nothing but something that expresses the need and desire of marketed objects and not something that is valued because of its ability to increase the understanding of human subjects. See Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1991).

38. T.Z. Lavine, *History and Anti-History in Philosophy* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 58–67.

39. As beautifully expressed by Isma'il al-Faruqi's *Tawhīd: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon: IIIT, 1992).

40. Masudul Alam Choudhury, "A Critical Examination of the Concept of Islamization of Knowledge in Contemporary Times," *Muslim Education Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 10.

41. Throughout the rest of this paper I shall make my theory of Islamic aesthetics a coherent and consistent description of Choudhury's principle of E-O simultaneity.

42. Al-Faruqi, 201–202.

43. As Hegel made it out to be, in subjugating art into the field of philosophy.

44. Choudhury, 8.

45. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

46. *Ibid.*, 19.

47. *Ibid.*, 19.

48. M. Abdul Jabbar Beg, "Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization," in *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*, ed. M.A.J. Beg, 2.

49. S. Parvez Manzoor, "The Legacy of Islam in the Visual Arts and the Role of Modern Muslim Youth in Preserving and Perpetuating This Heritage," *World Assembly of Muslim Youth* (March 1979): 9.

50. Beg, 9.

51. A.Z. Hammad, "Ghazali's Juristic Treatment of the Shariah Rules in al-Mustasfa," *The American Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 2 (December 1987): 163.

52. As a matter of fact, al-Ghazali concludes his discussion of reason and revelation by stating that there are four roots of error in determining good and evil: "1) confusion in the use of terminology; 2) subjective assessment of acts based on personal aims; 3) faulty generalization in characterizing *hasan* and *qubh* in disregard of exceptions to the rule; and 4) reason's erroneous imagination caused by association." Hammad, 63.

53. Attributed to the Prophet by Ibn Rashiḳ in *Kitab al-'Umda fi Mahasin al-Shi'r wa-adabih*, vol. 1, 27.

54. See Nietzsche's famous work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885).

55. Mohammad Rafi-ud-Din has a great treatise on this subject; see his *Ideology of the Future* (Islamabad, 1990).

56. Qur'an: 51:56–58; 2:29; 25: 61–62; 16:77–78; 14:34; 16:18.

57. Qur'an: 2:112, 272; 6:52; 13:22; 18:28, 110; 28:88; 30:39; 55:27.

58. Bowie's work, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, explains these relations and how many thinkers regarded these questions.

59. See al-Ghazali's, *al-Munqidh min al-dalal wa'l-musil ila dhi'l-'izza wa'-jalal*, Ar. ed. and French trans. by Farid Jabre (Beirut, 1959), where he addresses the issue that was disturbing him when he was younger: the question of the certainty of knowledge and existence.