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THE INFLUENCE OF INFLUENCE:
HOW NOT TO TALK ABOUT ISLAMIC CULTURE

One of the most commonly used words in discussions of Islamic culture is influence. We are told a good deal about how other forms of thought influenced Islamic philosophy, for example, and how the latter went on to influence non-Islamic philosophy in turn. When we come to study the individual thinkers the language of influence is thick in the air, and commentators tend to spend far more time talking about who influenced whom, or what idea influenced what other idea, than anything else, and certainly there is far more concentration on this than on whether the ideas are actually valid or not. This emphasis on influence has had a pernicious influence itself on the study of Islamic philosophy and science, and has helped position them more in the history of ideas than in philosophy and science as such, a reflection of the orientalist assumption that Muslims could not really create original work all by themselves. Another problem with this approach is that it produces an account of Islamic philosophy that makes it rather boring, since instead of readers being invited to discuss the ideas of the discipline, we are constantly informed on where those ideas may have come from, and how limited the thinkers then were in what they had to operate with, since they obviously were incapable of coming up with their own ideas.

The case of Ibn al-Haytham

Let us see a modern example of this by considering an issue in Islamic science, an issue that is very close to philosophy and can only really be understood if we understand Islamic philosophy. Ibn al-Haytham (5th /11th century) made a huge contribution to the science of optics, but a recent and very clever discussion of his ideas on perspective by Hans Belting brings out nicely what is wrong with this emphasis on influences. The argument goes like this. Ibn al-Haytham developed a theory of optics that was to become highly influential in Christian Europe. It came to be the basis of the theory of perspective that emerged in the Renaissance, and it might even be said made the Renaissance possible. The evidence for this is actually rather slim, since most Renaissance thinkers do not say much about Ibn al-Haytham, but refer more often to classical authors such as Ptolemy and Euclid, as one would expect given the enthusiasms for the Greek past by Renaissance theory. But that does not matter, it is entirely possible as Belting suggests that they saw the classical authors through the eyes of Ibn al-Haytham, to make an optical allusion,

since he was such a major figure in the new interest in the science of visualization. It has long been accepted that the Florentine architects and writers on art Alberti and Brunelleschi were cognizant with Ibn al-Haytham and their thought that was so influential in the Renaissance can be linked with him.

There are two problems with Belting's approach to this issue. One is that he sees Ibn al-Haytham as setting himself up against the classical authors, whereas in fact this is certainly not how he saw himself, and Ibn al-Haytham seems to have rather taken a bit further some of the main ideas of major classical mathematicians and scientists. But then this is always an issue when considering a great scientific thinker's relationship to his predecessors. Was he standing on the shoulders of giants, or trying to replace those shoulders with shoulders of his own? The major doubt though is not on this topic but Belting's insistence that Islamic culture is opposed to images. This is something he says with surprise has not been noticed by those writing about Ibn al-Haytham, that the latter concentrates on geometry and light, reflection and refraction as opposed to the mimetic and pictorial. Also, like Descartes, he sees images in the mind as in the brain and not in the eye. Ibn al-Haytham also is rather critical, we are told, of what these images can really tell us about the world.

Ibn al-Haytham and the Renaissance

What the Renaissance did was use the same theory and derive an entirely different conclusion from it. For them the geometrical construction of the visual field is a potential framework for pictures, Painting began to represent perspective, the particular point of view of an individual, and as we know this led to a new way of representing things in Renaissance art from what preceded it. Why did not Ibn al-Haytham move in this direction? The reason, we are told, is that he was a Muslim and Islamic culture avoided pictures and concentrated instead on the geometrical nature of art objects such as calligraphy, decoration and architecture, so that within Islamic culture geometry replaced pictures. The metaphysical point of this is to see geometry as purifying the world of generation and corruption, representing an essence that is truly representative of something deeper that reality illuminates but does not entirely encapsulate. Belting writes nicely on the differences in which light is regarded in the Renaissance and in the Islamic world. In the former light illuminates objects, and is used as an effective aesthetic tool while in Islamic culture it is itself the subject of decoration, not a tool of the aesthetic enterprise but its subject, since light is regarded as linked with something deeper that lies behind the world. Belting points to a thinker, Biagio Pelacani, as the person who brought Ibn al-Haytham's theory to the notice of the Renaissance by reinterpreting the new theory of optics in terms of the individual gaze.

Islam and the putative ban on images

The claim is that Ibn al-Haytham came up with a theory that he could not develop into a theory of pictorial perspective since for religious reasons he could not operate in terms of pictures. As a result he used the theory not to analyze pictures

but what pictures are more basically made of. He left it to others, in particular the Renaissance theorists, to apply his theory to pictures. This is very much a theme in Belting's approach to Ibn al-Haytham, and it is worth saying that we might question his accuracy here. In his *Optics* written in the 6th /12th century, Ibn al-Haytham does not treat beauty as an objective quality, but he links it with the sorts of qualities that human beings appreciate because they are visual, things like colour and shape, opacity and darkness, and the links we establish between different objects.[1] This rather goes against the idea that he was only interested in what things really are as opposed to how they seem to be, an idea that finds a brilliant novelistic exposition in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red*, a mystery story in which artists disagree on how things ought to be represented. In the novel some Muslim artists became entranced with the sort of Renaissance perspective they see in Venice and these ideas start to infiltrate the Ottoman court, while others, we are told for religious reasons, reject such painting for its human perspective on the world. They prefer to present the world synchronically as it were, so that it comes out more as a list of things, the way that God perhaps regards it, rather than as a particular *mis-en-scène* that has the meaning we ascribe to it. The principle is that in Islam meaning precedes form, while in Venice (i. e. Christianity) form precedes meaning. This is an interesting contrast, and we shall examine it, but it is also worth raising the doubt that Ibn al-Haytham is quite so clearly on one side of the debate as Belting thinks.

Who was the individual who applied Ibn al-Haytham's theory to pictures? According to Belting, it was Biagio Pelacani from Parma, a fifteenth century thinker interested in the notion of space. He wrote on visual theory and applied the Ibn al-Haytham's approach to space in the sense of a visual framework, which explored the notion of how things appeared to be, something that did not really interest Ibn al-Haytham since he was only interested in how the world really is, in terms of its mathematical nature. Why was he only interested in this? We are told it was because as a Muslim he was forbidden to be overly interested in the world as it appeared since this would involve images, and images are against religious law in Islam.

The form of the argument

Before I come to examine the specific parts of the argument, let us look at how these arguments tend to operate. They start by describing two separate ways of doing things, one Islamic and one non-Islamic. There is eventually taken to be something they have in common, so it may well be that one influenced the other. How can we tell? Well, sometimes people say something about what influenced them, and we often believe them. Sometimes they do not say but it looks obvious, and if we know that certain ideas were around at the time, then that makes the inference quite plausible. For example, we know that the sort of Greek philosophy read by the early Islamic philosophers was Neoplatonic, and so it is not difficult to argue

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[1] Ibn al-Haytham. Optics / Trans. A. Sabra. London, 1989. Vol. I. P. 209f.

that Islamic philosophy during this period was influenced by Neoplatonism. All this means is that it was Neoplatonic philosophy, that this was the style of philosophy, since the model of what it was to be a philosopher was a Neoplatonic model. And the reason that was the model was because the texts which were of interest to the philosophers at the time were Neoplatonic.

I have argued in the past that Neoplatonism goes nicely with the Abrahamic religions. For Christians there is an emphasis on the three, for Jews and Muslims there is the emphasis also on the one, and there is a hierarchy of being which follows a religious line where something is at the head of everything, and we and everything else are at the other end. There are layers of reality, and that fits in nicely also with much in the Qur'an and the bibles. It is worth noting that Neoplatonism was not the only form of philosophy available in the Greek cultural world at the time Muslims were coming into contact with that culture.

The influence of Greek on Islamic philosophy?

So when we say that Greek culture affected Islamic culture, which it did, we should be careful. The books which were translated were those which were of interest to the culture of the translators, as always, and that interest did not come from Greek culture. And when we say that the Muslim thinkers had difficulties with certain Greek ideas because they contradicted religious principles, which is also true, we should not forget that being part of a religion tends to include having difficulties in pulling together all aspects of the religion in a rational manner. The literature on Islamic philosophy is full of references to the conflict between religion and reason, or faith and philosophy, yet many debates in Islamic theology are thoroughly rational and predate the introduction of formal philosophy in the Islamic world by centuries. For example, how can one reconcile the anthropological language of the Qur'an with the immateriality and ubiquity of God? Are sinners unbelievers or just malefactors? What are the criteria of a text being divinely inspired? How does one reconcile the different things that the Qur'an appears to say on the same issue? The introduction of philosophy certainly adds another level of theoretical sophistication to such discussions, but it did not initiate those discussions, and it is a big mistake to see Greek culture as influencing the Islamic world in any other way than by adding yet another way of resolving intellectual issues to the rich store of what already existed.

The way the great dichotomy between religion and reason is supposed to work is that the thinker is torn between believing something for religious reasons, and yet finds it difficult to accept rationally, since perhaps there is a philosophical system of high status that denies its truth. Influenced by Islam, one wants to believe p, and influenced by Greek culture, one wants to believe not-p. This is illustrated best not in Islamic but in Jewish philosophy, albeit in Arabic, when Moses Maimonides addresses someone in the start of his *Guide of the Perplexed* who is precisely an individual who is a believer and yet also skilled in science, and finds a lot in the latter which he finds difficult to reconcile with the

former. It is tough to know what to do when one is being influenced by different people or ideas both of which strike one as worthy of respect, and yet which cannot both be true.

Problems with influence

This sort of conflict brings out nicely what is wrong in talking about influence, since this is not a helpful term. I remember many years ago having a garden with two neighbours on either side, both of whom gave me different advice on how to plant onions. Whatever I did I was going to offend one of them, since they spent most of their time outside watching what I did. Naturally I was reluctant to offend either of them, and even contemplated foregoing onions altogether! But this is not like the sort of intellectual conflict that occurs when two positions are incompatible, and both look tempting. In that sort of conflict the problem arises that we need to know where the truth lies.

It is important to grasp this, since often people comment that someone wanted to believe p as a Muslim, and not-p as a philosopher, but this does not make sense. What is at issue is not what people want to believe, but what they take to be true. Any thinker who rejected a belief because it was apparently incompatible with another belief that he has just like that would be a poor thinker indeed. To say that reason impels one to believe in the truth of something that religion forbids is to set up a problem, not solve it. Treating this apparent incompatibility is a problem precisely because we do not know how to resolve it, and were we really able to say that whatever our reason may establish, religion is the final arbiter then this represents stopping thinking. Of course, one might argue that there is an interpretation of religion which avoids the problem, or even that although we do not know how to resolve the problem, God does, and we can rely on him to sort it out. Both those responses are fine, and contrast with the idea that someone could just refuse to accept an idea because it seems to clash with religion.

In the *Guide* I.31 Maimonides refers to four sources of disagreement about things, referring to Alexander of Aphrodisias mentioning three kinds of disagreement. These are due to the difficulty of the issue, the desire for argument and the ignorance of the enquirer. Then there is another kind which Maimonides says was unknown to Alexander, and that is when one has an opinion that is based on habit. What he must mean by this is religion, since it is religion that makes believers committed to traditional views which they then find it difficult to give up. Maimonides is not urging that we abandon these traditional beliefs, quite the opposite, but he is suggesting that they need to be examined and analyzed so that what seems to be problematic about them with respect to rational positions that we also need to establish can be explained and dissipated. Is he here being influenced by religious views, or philosophical views, or both? I suppose he is, but the real question is about the point of asking this question, and answering it. How does the notion of influence help us understand what is going on here? It does help us understand where precisely he stands in the history of ideas, but is totally vacuous when

it comes to grasping what he saw as the issue he had to resolve, since this is a conceptual and not an historical issue, and to understand it we need to understand its philosophical and not only its historical parameters.

The vacuity of influence

But this seems just wrong, since after all is it not important to understand the position that someone has in the history of ideas if we are to be able to understand why they believe what they believe and do what they do? It is interesting historically, but not in any other way. To take an example, I am about to have my breakfast and what I eat, how I eat it and where I eat it are all historical aspects of who and where I am. Yet whether I eat bacon and eggs, or cereals with milk, or toast with butter, or coffee and croissant, are also part of a moral or aesthetic view that I may have taken on what it is right to eat at this time of the day. Situating someone historically does establish a context for the action but does not tell us anything about that debate as a debate about ideas, since those ideas have been batted around for millennia and rest on conceptual issues that transcend the historical. Noting what influences one in these debates does not help in resolving them intellectually. As Maimonides suggests, my saying that I eat a certain sort of breakfast because I had been brought up to eat it, or because my father always ate it, does not solve the problem of whether one ought to eat that sort of breakfast. We need to look away from the individual and towards the ideas themselves, since they have a dynamic which it is easy to confuse with the people who actually have them, and this confusion muddles a great deal of our understanding how ideas manage to be transmitted from one culture to another.

Back to Ibn al-Haytham

The most important issue in understanding how such transmission works is to understand how ideas affect culture as such. Belting suggests that because Islamic aesthetics is aniconic Ibn al-Haytham did not apply, or even could not apply, his theory of optics to the actual things of the world. One thing that should be said about this claim is that it is problematic since there were and continue to be many images in the Islamic world, and even at the time of Ibn al-Haytham himself images abounded. In particular, the scientific manuscripts that he would have examined often had pictures of the scientists themselves on their pages. The plates he saw, the tiles on the walls, the carvings and so on had no problem in representing things. It is an inconvenient truth for all those arguing that Islam bans images that the art of the Islamic world is replete with images. One of the wonderful results of generalizations is that they lead us to ignore what is there around us, since they do not fit into the generalization,

But let us put this to one side for the moment and ask how plausible it is to think that Ibn al-Haytham would invent a theory of optics and not apply it to how things appear to be in the world for religious reasons. Did he not notice that there are objects in the world that he observes from a particular perspective? Was he

not aware of the fact that when things are seen from one point of view they look different from when seen from another point of view, and that there is a scientific explanation for these differences? Did he not notice that there were objects moving around in the universe along with him, and wonder how it came about that we could observe them? Or was he as an Arab and a Muslim forbidden from reflecting in this way, and restricted in his science of optics from speculating on how and why things looks as they do, since they are physical objects and Islam apparently bans any interest in such objects, at least in an aesthetic sense?

We start to realize how bizarre this theory is. Influenced by Islam, we are told, the researcher is unable to apply his theory to what Islam forbids. That theory is itself influenced by Greek science, and eventually when influenced by Christian ideas of what can be represented blossoms into a full-blown theory of perspective. There is something splendidly Hegelian about this way of arguing. That is one of the problems with influence language, it encourages the idea of cultures being richer or poorer depending on how far they are influenced by particular ideas, and on the restrictions that are said to exist with respect to such influence. Those poor Muslims, benighted as they were by not being allowed to represent things, had to put up with a theory of perspective that they could not apply to things, and it took a Christian who was not thus restricted to show how their theory could be taken where it ought to go. So we move on, as it were, and eventually as we know this Christian understanding came to the Islamic world and enabled them to develop forms of art that resembled that produced in the more enlightened realms.

Belting gives two examples to demonstrate Ibn al-Haytham's lack of interest in images. One is his invention of the dark chamber (*al-bayt al-muzlim*) to demonstrate the direction of light from all points on the illuminated object through what surrounds it and radiates on all the facing objects. What interests him here are not the images that come with the light into the chamber. He also has a theory according to which the images with which we operate do not occur in the eye but in the brain. The optical process works in accordance with mathematics and the physics of light. Looking at an object does not really tell us a lot about it, according to Ibn al-Haytham. On this basis Belting builds up the idea of him as a representative of Muslim culture, disapproving of images and concentrating more on what he took to be the structural features that lie behind those images, the geometrical theory that describes the rays of light which impinge on the surface of the eye.

So why did Ibn al-Haytham refuse to recognize that in sight the images we form of things we see are not really information about those things? It could be, as Belting suggests, that being a Muslim he disapproved of images, or thought they were forbidden, and so could not be a part of what we would need to know. But it would be extraordinary to think that we could rule out a whole way of knowledge just because religion ruled it out. It would not be a sign of an impressive thinker if he blankly refused to accept the possibility of our acquiring knowledge through

images, or ignored such a route to knowledge. And of course that is not the situation here, despite what Belting suggests. Ibn al-Haytham adhered to the theory of imagination that was current in Islamic philosophy during his time, and this sees the imagination as not providing us with reliable access to knowledge, since it is too closely connected to us as physical creatures, to the world of generation and corruption. Knowledge, by contrast, is closely linked with the active intellect, the source of abstract information. What we call empirical knowledge really fails to be knowledge unless it has some link with the formal features of reality, unless it is necessary, in fact.

The problem with images

The trouble with images is that they are often arbitrary, as we mark in English with the rather dubious status of imagination (*khayāl*). According to the philosophers of the time imagination is the root of the problems we have in categorizing information we seem to have based on sense impressions as knowledge. We often do not just see something, but we add to what we see, or our expectations mean we see something that is not there, or is not there in quite the way we think. This is not the sceptical view that our senses may systematically let us down, but rather acknowledges the important role of imagination in what we call ordinary knowledge of the world, and to insist that for something to be knowledge it has to be possible to classify it formally. If we were to talk of influence, which of course I have been arguing we should not, we might well point to Aristotle as someone who might well be regarded as the source of such a theory, hardly someone who lived in an aniconic culture. Belting sees suspicion of imagination as based on a religious aversion to images, whereas in fact it is something quite different.

But is it not the case that Islamic culture has an entirely different attitude to images as compared with many other cultures? After all, there are all those geometrical designs, the plainness of mosque interiors, the emphasis on writing, and so on, in the Muslim world, in marked contrast to much that was going on at the same time in the Christian world. Whereas some Christians put a lot of emphasis on images such as those of Jesus and Mary, Islam seems to forbid the use of such images, and certainly forbids them for worship. Yet there were images in the Islamic world at the time of Ibn al-Haytham, and more importantly he must have been aware that people normally possess mental images of what they see around them and try to make sense of them. Whether they constitute knowledge is another matter, but it cannot be denied that those images exist, and the question can be raised how we acquire them, even if we do not think they constitute knowledge. The way to understand these mechanisms is explained by Ibn al-Haytham, and he concentrates on the different aspects of what is involved in image-construction, the parts of the process, especially the geometrical and mathematical mechanisms that operate to make it possible. He was not very interested in the resulting image since he did not see it as a reliable part of knowledge, not because of Islam but because of epistemology.

A dangerous form of argument

This shows how pernicious the language of influence can be. We note the work of a scientist, Ibn al-Haytham, and are impressed by the scope of that work. We see how he tried to do something different from his predecessors, and the use that was made of his theories by those coming after him, especially those in Christian Europe. Then the idea of influence arises, and we ask quite naturally, if he can be said to influence his successors, and yet they changed the orientation of his work. Why did he not do that himself? Why did he not notice that the light he was analyzing in fact resulted in the construction of images, that led to the possibility of working out how to paint or draw the world as how it seems to us to be when we look around it? The reason for this must be something that influenced him, and of course the main difference between him and his Christian followers might seem to be that he was a Muslim. But for that he too would have been able to take the Christian approach to perspective. This is such a common move in the influence argument form. Thinker A influences thinker B, yet B goes further than A. Why did not A see what B came to see? Something must have influenced him to not see it, so A, as a ..., and here we can fill in the blank with Muslim, Jew, etc. (it works best with someone who can be seen as the Other) was the prisoner of his cultural and religious environment and so could not see what B came to see. A did what he could given his circumstances, but now we have moved on from there and A is a footnote, whereas B is firmly positioned on the page.

It is worth spending a bit of time exploring why the notion of influence is so prevalent in the study of Islamic philosophy, by Muslims and non-Muslims. To a degree it is because many of the commentators on this form of thought are not really philosophers, but more historians or linguists, and so they feel much more comfortable talking about influence than the ideas themselves, which are a bit intimidating if one is not a philosopher. It is a bit like a homeopathic doctor being asked to sow up the bits of an open body after an operation, he might not be very sure where the different bits connect up with each other. But he would have an account of how the patient came to be sick, what influenced his body to get him to that state. That is what the physician could talk about, and perhaps all he could talk about. Nothing wrong with that, of course, but it is worth noting how limited it is in its grasp of how to resolve the situation.

Islamic exceptionalism?

It is also worth noting that Islam has a theory of how it encapsulates earlier religions of the Book, in particular Judaism and Christianity, in such a manner that influence language becomes rather useful. The earlier revelations sent to the people of the Book were perfectly valid, although their followers may well have changed their texts subsequently, but the final message of Islam subsumes them all, and expresses completely and perfectly the truth that the previous books were stumbling towards. What makes the difference here is influence, God influenced the earlier

revelations, and then decided to produce a final revelation written in such a way as to influence audiences to believe in it and follow the straight path that Islam sets out for humanity. The Qur'an is a very self-conscious text, constantly referring to itself as a message that is well-adapted to its audience, and that presents proofs of its reliability and fitness for the purpose it sets itself. It seeks to influence, and the people who came before its revelation were in many cases lacking something that was eventually to be made known. Since the language of influence is so ubiquitous in Islam, it is not surprising perhaps that it should have come to enjoy such a status in the study of Islamic culture.

On the other hand, the language of influence has been used also to devalue Islam, to point to what might have influenced the Qur'an that came from other religions and cultures, and that challenges its claim to uniqueness and divine origin. This is not the place to examine such arguments, and clearly it is always relevant and sometimes interesting to speculate on what might have influenced a particular cultural product. This is a question that arises, but it is not the only question nor the leading methodological principle, not if we have respect for the enterprise that is said to have been influenced by something else. Muslims do take account of the circumstances in which the Qur'an was given, and the interpretation of the Book involves understanding those circumstances and the historical conditions that surround them. That is why a distinction is often made between revelations given in Medinah and those given in Meccah, and the Traditions of the Prophet and his Companions are also useful in fixing the precise circumstances which we are to take into consideration before we establish a meaning for a scriptural verse and its implications for practice and belief. We always need to form a view of the context in which a sentence is produced if we are to understand it, however clear it might be.

This does not mean that we have to accept the account that Islam gives of itself, its sacred history included, but we do need to take account of the way in which the Qur'an and later significant texts are shaped in order to influence their varying audiences. This is something that the *falasifa* discuss at some length ever since the time of al-Farabi. The community consists of a wide variety of different individuals and so a successful revelation will have to find a way to address everyone in a way that is appropriate to him or her, and since just one way is not likely to be successful, the revelation will address different audiences in different ways, seeking to influence them in this way. This approach is exactly the same as advertisers try to adopt, although we need to distinguish between trying to communicate the truth and trying to communicate rather cynically a message that is intended to result in increased demand for a particular product. As a brand, though, Islam has been very successful in attracting large numbers of followers, and this can be attributed to a degree to the remarkable way in which the language of the Qur'an manages to influence the attitudes of a variety of audiences, an approach which is certainly carefully worked out by the author of the Book, who is after all the creator of the audiences themselves.

Thinking about how a message influences us is both to increase our awareness of what is before us, and also restricts us. We are addressed in the appropriate way,

and so we can more readily appreciate the truth, and this increases our knowledge and our ability to access that knowledge in a useful way. But what we need to notice here is that all this language of influence is not directly about truth at all, but just about communication. Fruitful forms of communication may be employed to transmit what is false just as readily as the truth, and understanding how influence works does not tell us anything at all about the truth of what is being efficiently or otherwise transmitted. This reveals what is so limiting about it as a hermeneutic principle. In philosophy, science, theology and the other Islamic disciplines the concern of the thinkers themselves is the truth, and getting as near to it as possible. Talking about influence is merely to talk about communication, and as we know truth and communication may be very distant topics indeed.

Poor old Ibn al-Haytham, despite his scientific brilliance he was hamstrung by the influence of the restrictive nature of Islam, he could not use the notion of pictures in his analysis of vision, or so we are told. We are often also told that other Muslim thinkers could not accept certain principles since they were not in line with Islam, as though they had a checklist of what corresponded with their religion, and whatever did not was then summarily dismissed. It has been argued here that this suggestion is both false and patronizing, and sets up a very misleading paradigm for research, here in Islamic science but this principle operates also across the whole gamut of Islamic culture and its study. The influence of influence has been far too prevalent and it is about time that it was replaced by a serious approach to the subject matter that lies before us.

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