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Al-Jāhiz on the senses: sensory moderation and Muslim synesthesia

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ABSTRACT

The celebrated Iraqi littérateur, al-Jāhiz (d. 255 AH/869 CE), devotes a long section of his opus magnum, *The Book of the Living*, to the topic of “sensation among the various classes of living things.” His observations about the wondrous qualities of the human and animal sensorium are also found elsewhere in *The Book of Living* and in other of his works. This article traces al-Jāhiz’s sensory theory in its epistemological and ethical dimensions, by pulling together key passages on the five senses from al-Jāhiz’s oeuvre. The article argues that al-Jāhiz develops a characteristic sensory style that is marked not so much by his desire to elevate sight above hearing, or human rationalism over animal sensualism, but rather by his erudite connoisseurship of the natural world and by his deep and measured appreciation of the phenomenon of synesthesia. Given al-Jāhiz’s exalted status in Arabic literary history, his moderate sensory style constitutes an important paradigm on which later thinkers active in the Islamic world could build.

KEYWORDS

al-Jāhiz; Islam; senses; Arabic literature; animals; epistemology; synesthesia

Towards a sensory history of the Islamic world

Classical Islamic civilization has produced lovely and enduring representations of the artful interplay of the bodily senses in the human discovery of, and joyful interaction with, the world. A well-known example is the pyxis of al-Mughīra, created in 356 AH/968 CE for al-Mughīra, youngest son of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III (r. 300–350/912–961), ruler of Muslim Spain. One of the medallions on this cylindrical, carved ivory box, now kept in the Louvre, depicts three male figures holding, respectively, a wine cup, luth, and flower: a confluence, in the eye of the beholder, of taste, sound, and smell (see [Figure 1](#)).

Despite such treasures, the history of the senses in the Islamic world remains an understudied field. In recent years, scholars have begun to argue more loudly for a shift in the study of Islamic art away from its dominant ocularcentric, object-focused paradigm to that of a study of Islamic perceptual culture more broadly conceived (Shaw 2019). However, despite such calls, much remains to be done for the “sensual turn” (Howes 2003, 29) to leave more than just a passing mark in the study of Islamic history and culture.

The purpose of the present article is to inscribe the figure of al-Jāhiz from Basra (b. around 160/776–7, d. 255/868) in this emerging field of study. Given al-Jāhiz’s fame as one of the most inventive and productive writers of the High Caliphate (ca. 80–333/700–945), if



Figure 1. The pyxis of al-Mughīra (photo by permission of Musée du Louvre, Paris).

not of all of Arabic literary history, his contribution to Islamic sensory theory has not gone entirely unnoticed. Various scholars have drawn attention to the important role he played in a major shift in the 3rd/9th-century Muslim episteme, a shift from orally transmitted knowledge to written knowledge, that is, from hearsay to eyewitness, and to books. In the first two centuries of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate in Baghdad (r. 132–923/750–1517), the splendid imperial city which became al-Jāhīz’s home in the second half of his life, Islamic society indeed became remarkably bookish (Gründler 2020). Building on the works of scholars like Gregor Schoeler and Shawkat Toorawa, James Montgomery states that the technological revolution in paper and book making made it “no longer acceptable . . . to rely on predominantly oral forms of disseminating knowledge” (Montgomery 2013, 5). Al-Jāhīz, a bibliomaniac who once remarked that there was more knowledge in his library than what might ever be learned by listening to teachers, both spearheads and embodies this shift. Similarly, Houari Touati has argued that in the time of al-Jāhīz, “sight operated an epistemological revolution in the classical Islamic episteme,” and that al-Jāhīz, “the pop-eyed one” (*al-jāhīz*), was the champion of *autopsia* (‘*iyān*), “seeing for oneself” (Touati 2010, 105).

However, as this article argues, al-Jāhīz’s sensory thought accomplishes more than just elevating vision over audition. Wary of sensory excesses, al-Jāhīz is deeply invested in the appreciation of the human and the animal sensorium as a whole, as well as in the idea of synesthesia. Al-Jāhīz’s magnum opus, the *Book of the Living* (K. *al-Ḥayawān*), includes a long chapter on “the sense perception of the various types of living beings” (al-Jāhīz 1938-45, vol. 7, 5–71), in addition to many scattered references to the extraordinary sensory abilities of a variety of animals and human beings. Al-Jāhīz’s concern with an Islamically informed “sensory model” (Classen 1997, 402) is also tangible elsewhere in his extensive oeuvre, such as in the *Epistle on Singing-Girls* (R. *al-Qiyān*) and the *Book of the Round and the Square* (K. *al-Tarbī‘ wa ‘l-tadwīr*).

In what follows, several sense-related passages in al-Jāhīz’s writings are analyzed and embedded in the context of his intellectual and social universe, that of 3rd/9th-century Iraq. First, the article discusses al-Jāhīz’s view of how the human and animal sensorium relate to each other. Then the discussion turns to how al-Jāhīz deals with each of the five

senses and with the phenomenon of synesthesia. The article concludes with a characterization of al-Jāhiz's overall sensory style, and with a reflection on al-Jāhiz's position in the sensory history of the Islamic world at large.

The animal and human sensorium according to al-Jāhiz

Halfway through the first of the seven volumes of the *Book of the Living*, al-Jāhiz unfolds a basic epistemological difference between human beings and animals. He states that while animals rely, without further reflection, on the knowledge they receive through their senses, human beings have the ability to interpret and build on sensory data by virtue of their capacity for thought and for clear communication (*tabayyun*) with other human beings. Human beings existentially depend on this capacity for computing sensory data and for communicating the results: it allows them to overcome, cognitively, the existence of evil (*sharr*) in the world. If there were no evil in the world, al-Jāhiz writes, there would be no need to think at all. "Instead of being angels, who are the purest of creation, and instead of being human beings, among whom there are the prophets and saints, we would all be animals, whether predatory or herbivorous, mired in a state of ignorance and stupidity" (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 1, 204.13-15). That is, in a world without evil, people would revert to the state of animals, which get by on bare sensory information and live only in order to satisfy their bodily needs. To remain stuck in the sensorium, however, is a far from desirable condition. "What is the pleasure," al-Jāhiz rhetorically asks (205.5-11),

of a beast that is fed, or of a predatory animal that draws the blood and eats the flesh [of other animals], compared to the joy of someone who overcomes enemies, or the joy experienced when, after knocking on the door of knowledge for a long time, it finally opens? [...] What is the pleasure of sense perception – consuming food and drink, listening to beautiful sounds, [seeing] pleasant colors and touching soft things – compared to the joy of issuing orders and prohibitions and of having one's decree hold sway, and of [experiencing] the obedience commanded by the signet ring, compelling [others] to accept one's argument?

A clear-cut binary emerges from this passage, between animals on the one hand and human beings on the other hand; between the former's sensory perception and the latter's intellectual insight and authority grounded in knowledge; between the former's sensory pleasure (*ladhdha*) and the latter's lasting joy (*surūr*). There can be little doubt on which side of the divide al-Jāhiz wishes to position himself. To rely only on the senses leads to serious errors of judgment. It would be a mistake, al-Jāhiz asserts, to think that the peacock, just because he is pretty, is nobler in the eyes of God than the raven (206.17). As he exhorts his readers, "do not follow what the eye shows you, but what reason shows you!" The exterior judgment (*ḥukm zāhir*) of the senses is inferior to the interior judgment (*ḥukm bāṭin*) of reason. Only reason provides true proof (*al-'aql huwa al-ḥujja*) (207.6-9). Sensation, in other words, is the hallmark of animal epistemology; humans, by contrast, build on it in order to progress to higher, truer levels of knowledge.

However, several facts undercut the impression that al-Jāhiz straightforwardly dismisses sensory perception as something that characterizes animals but not humans. He is too keen an observer of human nature to ignore that the differences between animals and humans tend to be gradual rather than categorical. Human beings, like it or not, are embodied, sentient beings. Like animals, they differ according to their "nature" (*tibā*).

This *ṭibāʿ* is the God-given mixture of cognitive abilities, carnal impulses and humoral liquids of a living being. Only when people are provided with a good balance in their *ṭibāʿ* do they develop the capacity to think and to doubt (vol. 6, 35.1–7). It is this ability that makes them fully human and elevates them above the rest of creation (vol. 5, 542.10–545.5; cf. van Ess 1991–97, vol. 4, 104–5). By implication, human beings whose *ṭibāʿ* is such that they never ponder anything and never experience doubt rather resemble animals.

As al-Jāḥiẓ states, “the common people (*ʿawāmm*) doubt less than the elite (*khawāṣṣ*); they do not hesitate to consider something to be correct or incorrect” (al-Jāḥiẓ 1938–45, vol. 6, 36.12–37.2; cf. Bernard 1974, 52). To be clear, such simple-mindedness, the inability to think or doubt, does not automatically condemn people to eternal perdition. According to a saying that is usually linked to Jesus in Muslim literature (al-Muttaqī 1989, vol. 15, 1236; cf. Matthew 10:16), but attributed by al-Jāḥiẓ to “the Companions of the messenger of God” (*aṣḥāb rasūl Allāh*), people should strive to “be simple-minded like the dove (*kūnū bulḥan ka-l-ḥamām*)” (al-Jāḥiẓ 1938–45, vol. 7, 35.7). The dove, in fact, shares many good attributes with human beings:

Don’t you see that God has given the dove [knowledge of] what is good for its sustenance and what is beneficial for procreation and taking care of its offspring? In this regard, the dove is not below the human being, even if the human being has been granted speech (*mantiq*) and reason (*ʿaql*), and control (*taṣrīf*) over many things (35.7–10).

Al-Jāḥiẓ, on more than one occasion, talks about the commensurability (*munāsaba*) and shared connection (*mushāraka*) between animals and human beings. On such evidence, James Montgomery has concluded that “it is difficult to maintain that al-Jāḥiẓ unquestioningly and without qualification put man at the apex of the hierarchy of creation” (Montgomery 2013, 262; see also Crone 2016, 101). What is more, while al-Jāḥiẓ lambasts the proverbial stupidity of certain human beings, he shows a great admiration for the sensory abilities of animals, their awe-inspiring powers of perception, something he refers to as their “subtle sensing” (*ḥiss laṭīf*) and their “true sensation” (*ṣidq al-ḥiss*).

Sensational animals

According to al-Jāḥiẓ, the extraordinary sensorium of animals is a token of God’s miraculous, divine craftwork (Montgomery 2013, 260). However, just like some human beings are similar to animals in that they lack intelligence and discernment, so certain animals share the bluntness of the human sensorium. *Mutatis mutandis*, there are extraordinary human beings that resemble certain animals in their sensory perspicacity.

For example, in the *Book of the Living*, al-Jāḥiẓ talks about the sharp sense of sight of a number of birds, such as crows, eagles, and hoopoes, as well as of other animals, such as horses, cats, mice, rats, and lions. Not all animals, however, have keen eyesight, and not all humans are weak-sighted. According to the model of extramissionism embraced by al-Jāḥiẓ, good vision correlates with the amount of light rays emitted by the eye. The bat (*khuffāsh*), al-Jāḥiẓ reports,

has poor eyesight, the pupil of its eye emitting only a small amount of rays. Therefore, the bat does not come out during darkness, because the darkness engulfs the light of its eye. Likewise, it does not come out during the day, for the bright day eclipses its eye, because its pupil is so weak (al-Jāḥiẓ 1938–45, vol. 3, 527.8–12).

The only time of the day, therefore, in which the bat has any chance of seeing anything is the twilight. Then it goes to hunt and feed (528.2–9).

Certain human beings, by contrast, have a special, highly acute faculty of sight, called *firāsa*. *Firāsa* is physiognomic vision, that is, the ability to assay the inside of a person or animal based on scrutinizing outward appearances (al-Tahānawī 1996, vol. 2, 1265b). Not all human beings are equally gifted with this special kind of perspicacity. In the short *Treatise on Representatives* (*R. al-Wukalāʾ*), al-Jāhiz warns that when appointing representatives (*wukalāʾ*), one must not rely too uncritically on *firāsa*, to avoid disappointment (al-Jāhiz 1964, vol. 4, 102.12–13). It is not only important to apply sound *firāsa* (*ṣiḥḥat al-firāsa*) based on “true sensation,” but also to demonstrate “the ability to extrapolate from the particular to the general” (103.3). It takes a special person to do this. In a letter to one of his patrons, a chief judge, al-Jāhiz praises the caliph for having had the foresight (*firāsa*) to appoint him (vol. 1, 318.9). In the *Book of the Living*, al-Jāhiz mentions the “master of physiognomy” (*ṣāhib al-firāsa*), Polemon of Laodicea (Arab. *Aflīmūn*, c. 90–144 CE), on several occasions, and he provides detailed instructions for assessing the worth of pigeons with the help of a number of *firāsa* techniques (al-Jāhiz 1938–45, vol. 3, 270.9–272.7). In other words, only certain gifted people, enlightened rulers for example, or skilled pigeon trainers, have powerful vision, and thus may be said to resemble animals in their ocular virtuosity.

As for hearing, al-Jāhiz encourages his readers to abandon hackneyed phrases like “his hearing is better than that of a horse,” or “his hearing is more acute than that of an eagle chick.” Instead, in order to appreciate the wondrous mechanisms of animal audition more fully, he suggests that one should consider animals “lowly in both status and significance, and small in body and worth” (vol. 7, 15.4–6). The polecat (*zaribān*), he states, is a vile creature, but it has the acutest sense of hearing of all the four-legged animals (*asmaʿ dābba fiʾl-araḍ*). When hunting for lizards, it puts one ear on the ground to locate the lizard in its burrow, then catching it when it exits the burrow (vol. 6, 371.13–372.2). However, it is another, even more lowly animal, that al-Jāhiz most admires for its aural prowess:

When a caravan journeys to a well at night, some men are sent ahead to prepare the buckets and other contraptions for watering the camels. These men spend the night by the well, anticipating the camels’ arrival. They will know, in the middle of the night, that the camels are approaching because the ticks will come out, scurrying around and producing a rustling sound. The ticks will move towards the shepherds, who will repel them, and the crackling of their feet on the ground will be audible. These men [by contrast] will not have heard or perceived anything of them [the approaching camels]. When they have inferred this [i.e. that the camels are approaching] from the ticks, they rise, gird themselves, get dressed, and prepare for work (vol. 7, 15.8–14).

No wonder that, rather than praising the proverbial hearing of horses or eagle chicks, the bedouin call a person with excellent hearing “more sharp-eared than ticks” (*asmaʿ min qurād*) (15.7).

According to al-Jāhiz, ostriches, horses, hunting dogs and wolves can sniff out the traces of scent over great distances, but again it is a tiny insect that takes the prize. Ants, states al-Jāhiz, have “true olfaction” (*ṣiḍq al-shamm*), the ability to smell “what a human being, [even] one that is hungry, is incapable of smelling” (vol. 4, 7.6). Elsewhere in the *Book of the Living*, he elaborates that

the ant smells things that do not [even] have a scent (*mā laysa lahu rih*), including things that, were I to put them right in front of your nose, you would not smell at all, even if you sniffed vigorously, for example, the leg of a locust that you drop in a place where not a single ant is to be seen. In no time, you'll see ants marching towards it in a black, string-like procession (vol. 4, 402.11–403.2).

Human beings, in sum, do not measure up to ticks as regards their hearing, nor can they compete with the olfaction of ants. "There are things," al-Jāhiz writes, "that these animals perceive and skills they possess by virtue of their nature, without thinking and by sheer instinct, that human beings cannot normally reach, unless when they exercise themselves to ponder and to investigate, to discover and to compare, something which is difficult for them" (vol. 7, 17.13–16). Again, however, there are exceptions, as al-Jāhiz relates on the authority of an acquaintance in Baghdad:

Ibrāhīm b. al-Sindī used to tell me stories about his father's remarkable sense of smell, the like of which is otherwise only attributed to predatory animals, ants, and ostriches. He claimed that one day, his father said: "I smell mouse urine!" Then he sniffed around and let his nose wander about the room, and said: "It's in that corner!" They inspected the corner and indeed, there was, on the fringe of the rug, a moist spot the size of a small coin (*dirham*) or slightly bigger, and they determined it to be mouse urine (vol. 4, 425.2–6).

Though closely related to the olfactory sense, gustation is mentioned in the *Book of the Living* only in passing, and only in negative terms. Al-Jāhiz tells us that a taste for food engenders gluttony (*sharah*). This was a trait of character associated with urbane libertines of the early 'Abbāsīd period (Szombathy 2013, 120–1). Gluttons, al-Jāhiz points out, are disposed to sin:

As regards food, drink, sex and perfume and all the things that appeal to the senses (*min naṣīb al-ḥawāss*), it is well-known that the more voracious and desire-driven people are, the more obsessed they are with food (*atamm li-wijdānihi l-ṭa'm*), thus becoming like starving people when they are fed or thirsty people when they are given drink. Now, if we compare the benefit derived from lasting joy with the pleasure of food, considering all the things that gluttony occasions, such as insomnia, inflammation, physical unease and burning thirst, it is readily understood that gluttons benefit less: they are reviled for it [their gluttony] and it propels them to commit sins. Besides, when satiation (*ni'ma*) subsides, nobody is more miserable than they (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 2, 98.8–15).

Al-Jāhiz's words reverberate with the traditional Bedouin contempt for gluttony, but also with a trope in early Islamic ascetic literature: that sinfulness, the fall from grace, is due to humankind's "hollow" (*mujawwaf*) state and thus a function of people's desire to fill their stomachs. Adam and Eve, it is related in this literature, were expelled from paradise because they had eaten the forbidden fruit and thus incurred the need to defecate (Gramlich 1997, 109). The consumption of food gives rise to ritual impurity but it also prompts a major sin, namely, concupiscence, a connection al-Jāhiz demonstrates by invoking the visible sexual arousal of donkeys and horses:

As for gustation, it is thought that it is related to gluttony and greed, an excess of metabolism, cupidity and appetite; that the pleasures derived from it correlate with how gluttonous and greedy one is; and that they correspond to visible sexual agitation and outward signs of lust. Just think of a jack when he sees a jenny, or a stallion when he sees a mare (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 7, 16.4–7).

Al-Jāhīz tells his readers that such excesses are only found in the animal kingdom, that is, generally speaking: “We find that men, when [gluttony] seizes them, are not like this, except when they are overcome by the most intense lust and the most excessive desire (16.9–11).” In other words, certain people, under certain circumstances, *do* have the same unbridled taste for food and sex that animals have. Again, what al-Jāhīz is evoking here is a continuum of animal and human sensation, rather than a categorical difference between the two.

The case is similar with the sense of touch. Kissing is the quintessential touch, and al-Jāhīz singles out two species for their devotion to it. “Only doves and human beings kiss,” he notes. “The male dove,” he further explains, “does not cease to do it until he’s become utterly decrepit . . . [and] female doves also kiss each other, and it is said that from this they hatch eggs, but that from these eggs no chicks emerge” (vol. 3, 177.2–8). There may be an innuendo here that there is something rather grotesque about old men kissing and something rather futile in kisses exchanged between members of the same sex. Be that as it may, the doves’ conspicuous sexuality, for al-Jāhīz (or to be more precise, for the person whose views he is relating, that is, the Proponent of the Dog [see Montgomery 2013, 143 and *passim*]), is something to be wary of:

Some people refuse to let doves into their homes because . . . doves outdo human beings in showoffery, tail-wagging and kissing. All that kissing, grooming, and feather-ruffling, the vainglory [of the male dove] after accomplishing the deed, the female dove riding the male dove (unsuccessfully, by lack of a penis), is apt to arouse women (al-Jāhīz 1938-45, vol. 1, 373.16–374.4).

However, al-Jāhīz also notes approvingly that doves, unlike most other animals, are usually monogamous (vol. 7, 69.5–10). Also in other respects, as we already noted above, the doves’ “delicate nature” (*riqqat al-tibāʿ*) is remarkably similar to that of refined human beings. For example, doves enjoy the gift of musicality (Kilpatrick 2009, 29). Just like a master physiognomist, al-Jāhīz relates, can discern whether a person hails from Kufa, Egypt, Medina, Syria, or Yemen, so a pigeon expert will perceive immediately what the lineage, gender and country of origin is of a particular pigeon (al-Jāhīz 1938-45, vol. 3, 211.5–10). In sum, while doves are scandalously haptic, they are also curiously tender, if simple-minded, creatures.

Al-Jāhīz on synesthesia

As James Montgomery has argued, one of the underlying themes of the *Book of the Living* is cross-categorization, a practice al-Jāhīz defends against the strict taxonomies and cultural purism of the transmitters of Prophetic knowledge, the hadith folk. Al-Jāhīz’s “abiding interest . . . in things which seem to belong in more than one category” (Montgomery 2013, 170) is also visible in his sensory theory, which, as is argued here, centers on the notion of synesthesia. For the purpose of the following discussion, the concept of synesthesia is understood not in the narrow neurological sense of one sense triggering, unwittingly, another sense, but in cultural terms: as the acquired ability to experience different sensations as mutually reinforcing one another, resulting in a comprehensive sensory event that is bigger than the sum of its parts (see van Campen 2007, 101–2). Al-Jāhīz thinks of sensory stimuli such as sound or smell as material

bodies (*ajsām*) or substances (*jawāhir*), an idea he inherits from his teacher al-Nazzām (d. between 220/835 and 230/845). Al-Nazzām, according to Josef van Ess, was an epistemological “sensualist.” He nurtured a strong interest in the natural sciences and emphasized the role of the five senses (above other, more common taxonomies, e.g. of the four elements) in describing the phenomenological complexity of the world (van Ess 1991-97, vol. 3, 334–338, 353). Al-Nazzām further argued that the five senses are each of a different kind (*jins*). Within a kind, sensory stimuli can be opposed to one another, like sweet and sour in the case of taste, or bright and dark in the case of vision. They can obstruct and abrogate one another: a pleasant smell can neutralize a foul smell. But there is no such opposition or abrogation occurring *between* the different kinds of sensation: sound cannot abrogate, obstruct or oppose taste, and so on (van Ess 1991-97, vol. 3, 353). As al-Jāhiz drily remarks, there is no point in listening to perfume (al-Jāhiz 1964, vol. 2, 170.11). This does not mean, however, that sensory organs do not meaningfully relate to each other. Already al-Nazzām, as quoted by al-Jāhiz, drew attention to the simple fact that when someone answers the question, “Did you see such-and-such?” by saying, “Yes, I saw him,” the ear “transmits something” (*addā ilā*) to the eye, and the eye “transmits something” to the tongue (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 4, 442.6–9). In other words, perception tends to be based on the combined activity of the sensory organs, rather than resulting from a single sense, such as vision or hearing only. Al-Jāhiz builds on this model and adds new facets to it (van Ess 1991-97, vol. 4, 111). He emphasizes that the senses work together, speaking not only of the “transmission” of one sense to another, but of the senses’ “collaboration” (*ta’āwun*) (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 4, 442.4). Furthermore, he stresses that sensory perception, regardless of the number of senses that are involved, is an integrated, unified experience, one that takes place in the soul (*nafs*) of the human being. According to the heresiographer al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936), al-Jāhiz held that the senses are, in fact, of one and the same kind; they are distinguished merely in terms of the type of sensibilia (*jins al-mahsūs*) to which they relate, as well as in terms of certain contingent conditions pertaining to the sensing subject and the individual sensory organ. Ultimately, al-Jāhiz reportedly asserted, “there is only one kind of sensing subject (*ḥassās*), and only one kind of sensation (*ḥiss*)” (al-Ash‘arī 1929-30, 341.10; cf. Bernard 1974, 53–4). It is the confluence of sensory stimuli in the *forum internum* of the soul that is central to al-Jāhiz’s model. Provided the soul is appropriately receptive toward the sensory stimuli, true knowledge and true emotion are the result. As al-Jāhiz explains in the *Book of the Living*, “the senses cannot convey anything to the soul in the way of sound, sight, taste, smell or touch, *unless* the intellect moves it to either accept or reject it” (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 3, 288.10–289.2).

It is not easy to reconstruct al-Jāhiz’s sensory theory based only on the passages written by himself or the fragments attributed to him by others. Some light can be cast on this issue by adducing other passages in his work in which al-Jāhiz describes moments of synesthetic, or multi-sensory perception. It is in such passages, beyond al-Jāhiz’s often insightful and entertaining observations about the single senses of certain animals and human beings, that al-Jāhiz’s particular sensory style becomes tangible. For example, the art of *firāsa* deployed by professional pigeon-keepers consists not only of correctly observing the shape, look and movement of pigeons, but also of assaying the firmness of their muscles, the softness of their feathers, and the hardness of their beaks, among other tactile qualities (vol. 3, 270.10–271.11). In a story al-Jāhiz quotes in the *Book of the Living*, a young woman asks her mother on the day of her wedding-night whether she

should worry about the size of her future husband's sex. If it is as big as that of an elephant, would not her anatomy have to be equal to that of a female elephant? "My dear daughter," her mother reassures her,

if God turned all people into elephants, then no [woman turned] female elephant, despite her enormous body, would experience the kind of pleasure that you will experience today with your husband. [If you were an elephant] you would be deprived of the pleasure of smelling and kissing, of embracing and rolling about, of perfumes and make-up, of beautiful clothes and toiletry, of teasing and promises of love (vol. 7, 238.3–7).

Here, vision, smell, taste, touch and spirited banter between lovers all come together to produce something bigger than the sum of its parts. Sex is the context *par excellence* in which synesthetic pleasure occurs, and al-Jāhīz, as the quote makes clear, was no prude (Szombathy 2013, 210). Al-Nazzām, we are told, even believed in the existence of a sixth sense, functioning exclusively to perceive sexual pleasure (al-Baghdādī 1928, 10.3). Al-Jāhīz is said to have admitted the possibility of a sixth sense, too, and to have stressed that this sense, like the other five senses, would be governed by the usual principle of perception "by contiguity, or interpenetration, or union (*bi-l-mujāwara aw bi-l-mudākhala aw bi-l-ittiṣāl*)" (al-Ash'arī 1929-30, 341.15; see Bernand 1974, 33).

In his *Epistle on Singing-Girls*, al-Jāhīz further expounds on the mechanism of synesthesia and on the interplay between the pleasures of the body and the joys of the heart. When a man is in the presence of a singing-girl, the *Epistle* explains,

three of the sensory organs are involved, and the heart makes a fourth. The eye enjoys the sight of a beautiful, coveted girl (and indeed, dexterity and beauty are seldom found in a single object of enjoyment and delight); the hearing has an unencumbered share of her, the ear delighting in nothing but her; and the sense of touch experiences carnal desire for her and the longing for sexual intercourse. All the senses are scouts for the heart, and witnesses testifying before it. When the girl raises her voice in song, the gaze is rivetted on her, the hearing is directed attentively to her, and the heart surrenders what it has to her. Hearing and sight race each other to see which of the two can convey what she has bestowed on them to the heart before the other, and they arrive at the heart's core and pour out what they have observed. On feeling joy (*surūr*) [in his heart], [a man's] tactility is aroused, so that he has at one and the same time three concurrent pleasures (*ladhdhāt*), such as he would not find conjoined in anything else, and the like of which the [individual] senses could never give him (al-Jāhīz 1964, vol. 2, 170.12–171.9).

This passage is remarkable in several ways and has accordingly attracted the attention of a number of scholars (see Jarrar and Jaafar 2009, 269; Motoyoshi 2009; Patel 2018, 7–8). Next to al-Jāhīz's striking use of metaphor, the crucial link between the "pleasures" of the senses and the "joy" of the heart, a motif already introduced above, deserves to be highlighted. Al-Jāhīz describes a seamless continuum connecting the senses to the heart, an intimate dynamic of sense and sensibility (Patel 2018). This dynamic, it should be noted, works both ways. The senses provide joy to the heart, but the heart also stimulates the sensory organs, increasing their pleasure.

It is this dynamic model of synesthetic experience that elevates human beings, or at least some, over animals. Here, despite the fact that the abilities of animals and humans are in many respects commensurable (*munāsib*), a profound difference between animal sensation and human sensation becomes tangible. Animals, as we saw, have amazing sensory capabilities, which allow them to anticipate all kinds of opportunities and threats.

Yet, their sensation falls short on two accounts. First, as we showed in the first part of this article, animals are unable to lift sensory knowledge to higher levels of perception; they “perceive by virtue of their natural constitution, not by virtue of reflection, by virtue of the instinct of the soul, not by cogitation” (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 7, 72.2–3). Secondly, despite achieving virtuosity in the use of a single sense, they lack the ability to perceive the world in an integrated, synesthetic fashion: “They have these [sensory abilities] partially not jointly, dispersed not ordered (*mufarraḡ ghayr majmū‘, wa-munqati‘ ghayr manzūm*)” (72.10–11).

Al-Jāhiz’s moderate sensory style

In conclusion, in what sense, if any, can al-Jāhiz be called a sensualist? To answer this question, one must distinguish between his epistemological and his ethical theory. As regards the former, that is, the role al-Jāhiz grants the senses in his theory of knowledge, there is a clear strand of empiricism in his thought. As we noted above in the introduction, seeing for oneself (*‘iyān*) and empirical experience (*tajriba*) are paramount principles of al-Jāhiz’s epistemology (van Ess 1991-97, vol. 4, 102). Rather than following hearsay, al-Jāhiz generally recommends that one should seek direct and if possible ocular evidence. Al-Jāhiz, Houari Touati writes, “played an essential role in Islam in promoting sight to the dignity of a positive tool for knowledge,” to counterbalance the one-sided reliance on oral instruction in the circles of religious learning (Touati 2010, 105).

However, al-Jāhiz’s empiricism is certainly not absolute (Touati 2010, 109). He takes issue with the Dahriyya, a group of atheist, materialist philosophers and physicians flourishing in 3rd/9th-century Baghdad, who argued that knowledge results from nothing but sensory impressions and the regularities of the natural world perceived through the senses (*al-mahsūsāt wa ‘l-‘ādāt*). The Dahriyya conceptualized this mechanism of knowledge acquisition in a rather straightforward way, without recognizing there was much need for thinking, or indeed for revelation and religion (Crone 2016, 104). Al-Jāhiz vociferously attacks the Dahriyya, accusing them of erasing all differences between animals and human beings (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 7, 13.10–11).

Al-Jāhiz is also less directly a “sensualist,” in epistemological matters, than al-Nazzām. He shares some basic assumptions with his teacher, such as the notion that the sensibilia are bodies, or that vision occurs by extramission (van Ess 1991-97, vol. 3, 354; Pellat 1969, 158; Bernand 1974, 35–6). He is more critical than al-Nazzām, however, regarding the criteria for admissibility of sensory knowledge. For al-Nazzām, the sign of certain knowledge is the “quietude of the heart” (*sukūn al-qalb*), the moment when one feels that all doubts have been overcome (van Ess 1991-97, vol. 4, 102–103). For al-Jāhiz, “quietude of the heart” is no criterion for truth. The senses can deceive. They must be checked and, if necessary, corrected in a lengthy process of reflection, supported by cumulative empirical experience. “The eye can make a mistake and the senses can lie,” al-Jāhiz states. “Only the mind (*dhihn*) judges decisively and only the intellect (*‘aql*) can explain things correctly, for they are the halter of the body and the yardstick of the senses (*‘iyār al-ḥawāss*)” (al-Jāhiz 1955, 14.7–9).

We must not forget, either, that al-Jāhiz, though famous first and foremost as a belletrist, has a theological agenda. He is keen to demonstrate God’s power over creation (Pellat 1969, 22). God can disrupt the course of human perception

(Montgomery 2013, 327–31). For example, according to the story of king Solomon as told in the Qurʾān, after his death Solomon kept leaning on his staff, so that his servants, jinn and humans alike, believed he was still alive, and continued to exert themselves in the construction of his palace (see Qurʾān 34:14). Al-Jāhīz explains that when “confronted with a corpse like this,” under normal circumstances people will notice, or “at least speculate and entertain suspicions” (al-Jāhīz 1938-45, vol. 4, 91.10–11). It is only because God deflected their senses and minds from Solomon’s true condition that his retinue did not realize what was going on. According to this theory of “deflection” (*ṣarfa*), God is responsible not only for occasionally disabling the sensorium, but also for miraculously enhancing it. It is in this way that the patriarch Jacob was able to smell the scent of his son Joseph in a shirt that was being transported in a caravan traveling from Egypt toward Syria (see Qurʾān 12:94). The scent of Joseph, al-Jāhīz explains, was “a sign that appeared to him [Jacob] especially (*ʿalāma zaharat lahu khāṣṣatan*), for usually humans do not smell the scent of their children when they are far away from their noses” (vol. 4, 426.11).

As for whether al-Jāhīz was a “sensualist” in ethical terms, unfortunately we cannot answer this question in light of his private lifestyle, as we know almost nothing about it (Pellat 1953, 242). Al-Nazzām, the most important intellectual influence on al-Jāhīz, is said to have been no ascetic. He enjoyed wine-drinking and the company of beautiful boys, and he entertained a friendship with the notoriously profligate poet Abū Nuwās (d. between 198/813 and 200/815) (van Ess 1991-97, vol. 4, 299, 305–6). Also al-Jāhīz knew Abū Nuwās; they shared friends and patrons. In sum, al-Jāhīz was familiar with the refined, sensually saturated culture of ʿAbbāsīd high society (Pellat 1953, 248). But we do not know to what extent, if any, he was an active participant in it.

Unlike Abū Nuwās, al-Jāhīz did not propagate hedonism. He did not encourage a life in pursuit of sensory pleasures. Far from it: as we saw above, he expressed sympathies for the principles of renunciatory piety, dismissing the value of the “pleasures of sense perception” and disparaging gluttony and lust. In his *Epistle on Life and Death* (*R. al-maʿāsh wa ʿl-maʿād*), a *Fürstenspiegel* addressed to the affluent son of an ʿAbbāsīd vizier (see Gerjes 1982), he enjoins his protégé to make sure that his reason (*ʿaql*) at all times keeps his passions in check; he warns him, in particular, against the company of gluttons (al-Jāhīz 1964, vol. 4, 70.9–12, 76.11). After his glowing description of the multiple sensory pleasures provided by singing-girls in his *Epistle on Singing-Girls*, al-Jāhīz is quick to add that these pleasures are exactly what makes singing-girls so dangerous (vol. 2, 171.9–12). Also in his theology, there are obvious anti-somatic motifs. He is a well-known polemicist against anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*), and when, in his *Epistle against the Christians* (*R. Radd ʿalā al-Naṣāra*), it comes to defending the tenets of the Muslim faith against Christian attacks, he rather tellingly fails to mount a defense of the physical pleasures of the Islamic paradise (Lange 2021, 273–274).

However, al-Jāhīz is by no means categorically opposed to sensory pleasures. He appreciates the therapeutic effects of music and, although wary of the potentially devastating impact of singing-girls, criticizes those who allege that music automatically leads to immorality (Kilpatrick 2009, 33, 35–36). Female circumcision, according to al-Jāhīz, does not serve to deny women sexual pleasure but to reduce their desire (*shahwa*) to a moderate level (*iʿtidāl*) (al-Jāhīz 1938-45, vol. 7, 28.3). He writes with his typical curiosity about the origin of musk, establishing its provenance from a “small gazelle” rather than a mouse, thereby clearing up a lingering confusion among Arab men of letters

(vol. 5, 301.2–8, 304.7–9; see King 2017, 148, 151, 160–161). He also dispels any scruples about musk's ritual purity (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 5, 304.9–305.7; see King 2017, 212–213). Al-Jāhiz is not impressed by the comprehensive asceticism of certain famous pious men of his age, such as the traditionist Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), criticizing their “perverse refusal to enjoy the ‘good things’ (*al-ṭayyibāt*) provided for humankind” (Cooperson 2009, 201). Not enjoying these “good things,” when provided the opportunity, in fact degrades human beings:

People who have many possessions and abundant coins either desire swift carriages, soft clothes, pretty girls, beautiful mansions and good food, or they do not desire any of this. Those who do not desire any of this, nor invest their money in [preparing for] the afterworld, nor take pleasure in cultured conversation, instead finding pleasure only in having abundant coins, are donkeys, nay, they are more ill-tempered and more stupid than donkeys (al-Jāhiz 1938-45, vol. 2, 98.17–99.5).

In this passage, al-Jāhiz turns the tables on misers and renunciants. Not those who indulge in the senses but those who refuse to enjoy sensory pleasures are animals, and dumb ones at that.

Conclusion

In sum, al-Jāhiz's sensory style is a refined, moderate one. In epistemology, he rejects the crude sensualism of atheist empiricists, and he adds psychological nuance to the sensualism of natural philosophers and theologians like al-Nazzām. He defends (ocular) empiricism against the dominant ear-based episteme of his day. However, the senses, like the four humors of the body, have to be in the right balance to enable higher forms of perception. In ethics, he warns against the hedonistic sensualism of libertinism (Szombathy 2013), exemplified by the likes of Abū Nuwās, but he does not advocate total renunciation of the senses, nor is what has been described as the “mild asceticism” (Hurvitz 1997) of the pious bourgeoisie much to his liking. Readers of al-Jāhiz cannot fail to be impressed by how admiringly al-Jāhiz writes about the sensorium. “True sensation,” whether of animals or human beings, is one of the signs of God's wonderful design of the universe. There is something essentially positive, in other words, in engaging and honing the senses. The point is not to overcome the senses and to leave the sensible world behind, but to build on them and, ideally, to combine sensory impressions into a unified, emotionally and intellectually enriching experience of synesthesia.

Whether in al-Jāhiz's lifetime or in later periods of Islamic intellectual history, one cannot speak of a single Muslim episteme, or sensorium. In certain late-medieval manifestations of Sufi culture and sensory theory, taste (*dhawq*) and smell (*shamm*, Pers. *bū*) came to play a central role, while ritual séances of audition (*samā*), often including various kinesthetic elements, continued to be performed by Sufis throughout the centuries. In Islamic theological thought, “the age-old battle between the eye and the ear” (Jay 1988, 323) was never unanimously decided (see, e.g. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya n.d., 288–293). A history of the senses in the Islamic world, therefore, has to account for the existence of multiple sensory styles, all developing according to their

own dynamic: in theological and philosophical epistemology, in Sufism, in literature and in the arts, in Sharia law and the ethical tradition, and in a range of other discursive formations as well.

Al-Jāhiz occupies a significant position in the complex matrix of Islamic sensory culture. However, his significance is not limited to rehabilitating sight vis-à-vis hearing; nor would it be correct to state that he simply and categorically elevates human, reason-based epistemology over animal, sensation-based epistemology. Human and animal sensation, as this article has shown, form a continuum in al-Jāhiz's thought. Certain, but not all human beings get stuck in the lower range of this continuum; many, but not all animals rise above them. Some human beings are more sensorially gifted than others, whether by their natural condition or by divine intervention, and the same applies to animals. Human sensation, however, is distinguished from animal sensation by two things. First, human beings have the potential for supplementing and refining sensory knowledge by the checks-and-balances of reason. They can thus achieve an ideal state of sensory moderation. Second, they enjoy, potentially but crucially, the ability for synesthesia.

Sensory moderation, both in epistemological and ethical terms, and an artful appreciation of synesthesia: these two notions may be counted as al-Jāhiz's enduring contribution to the sensory style of the Arabic literary tradition. Scholars no longer give much credence to the idea that there was once an identifiable school of thought spawned by the books of al-Jāhiz in Muslim Spain, as was once claimed by the great Spanish Islamicist, Asín Palacios (1946, vol. 1, 27–28). One thing, however, seems certain: al-Jāhiz would have appreciated the pyxis of al-Mughira.

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