

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Inṣāf: Authorial Justice

JEANNIE MILLER

لا عُذِرَ لمن كتب كتاباً وقد غاب عنه خصمه، وقد تكفل بالإخبار عنه، في ترك الحيلة له، والقيام بكل ما احتمله قوله كما أنه لا عُذْر له في التفسير عن فساد كل قول خالف عليه، وضاد مذهبه، عند من قرأ كتابه وتفهم أدخاله، لأن أقل ما يُزِيلُ عذره ويزيح عِلته، أن قول خصمه قد استهدف لخصمه، وأصْحَرَ للسانه ومكَّنه من نفسه، وسلَّطه على إظهار عورته. فإذا استراح واضع الكتاب من شغَب خصمه ومداراة جليسه، فلم يبق إلا أن يقوى على كسر الباطل أو يعجز عنه.
(al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Futūyā* 1: 314.18–315.4)

When someone writes a book in the absence of his opponent [*khaṣm*], and when he has taken responsibility for providing information about his opponent's position, it is inexcusable for him not to be exhaustive and not to include all his opponent's possible arguments. So too it is inexcusable for him to be lax in [showing] the corruption of any statement opposing or contradicting his own system in the estimation of the readers of his book who have already comprehended [the system's] defects.

For the following [simple fact] alone puts a stop to any excuse and removes all argument in the writer's defense: his opponent's words are an easy and vulnerable target for his tongue. His opponent has given him control of his person and the power to expose his private shame. And since the writer enjoys repose from the mischief of his opponent and the blandishments of his companions, all that remains is that he is either capable or incapable of smashing falsehood.

(Montgomery, *Al-Jāhiz* 203; trans. modified)¹

In the passage above, al-Jāhiz outlines a concept of authorial justice centered on the author's ethical obligations to an absent figure, the *khṣm* (*khaṣm*; "opponent"). The opponent is a character in a paradigmatic scene of public disputation. In al-Jāhiz's youth, public disputation was the top forum for establishing intellectual prestige and dominance. Although al-Jāhiz played an important role in promoting a written system for transmitting knowledge, his solitary work of

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writing books is still haunted by the scene of public disputation. He was intensely aware that in a book, with a single author in control, there is nobody to object when the argument goes astray, and for him this absent opponent left a gaping hole. The disputation opponent served as a formal mechanism for checking an unsupported thesis—a form of peer review. In an emerging book culture, the impartiality of intellectual content was felt to be newly vulnerable, protected only by the individual author's personal sense of justice.

Specific authorial obligations emerged from this vulnerability, in al-Jāhīz's view: when advancing a thesis, the author must include all possible objections, presented in the most persuasive manner possible; and when there are internal contradictions in the author's system, the author must reveal these and confront them head-on. The greatest abuse of solitary authorship would be to gloss over problems in the hope that readers would be swept along with the rhetoric, reaching a facile agreement with the author devoid of critical grounding. Here, a new character makes its appearance—the *القارئ* (*al-qāri'*; "the reader")—who takes the place of the absent opponent. This imagined future reader hounds the author throughout the writing process, calling for an acknowledgment of every inaccuracy and contradiction. Authorial justice is here presented as an internalization of the role of the opponent in debate, through the construct of an imagined reader.

Situated at the vanguard of a major transition from a primarily aural mode of knowledge transmission to a written one, following the introduction of paper to the Abbasid Empire in the late eighth century, al-Jāhīz has been hailed as one of the first Arabic writers to compose for the book market (Schoeler). Before this, the leading intellectual formats were not written documents circulating independently (*كتاب* [*kitāb*; "book or other written text"]), but rather gatherings where authors, transmitters, students, and opponents were present to explain, discuss, and challenge the text being transmitted. Writing was used by teachers and students as an informal memory aid, but circulation remained aural. Al-Jāhīz points out the newness of the format:

هذا كتاب لا يحتاج إلى حضور صاحبه ولا يفقر إلى المحتجين عنه
(*al-Bayān* 3: 375.3–5)

This is a book that does not require the presence of its author and does not need defenders arguing for it.²

In outlining his rules for authorial justice, al-Jāhīz responded to a cultural anxiety about the ethics of publicizing a new text in the absence of intellectual challenges.

From the perspective of epistemic justice, there were, however, also benefits to writing books. In a disputation, the opponent's presence could provoke defensiveness and ire, distorting one's judgment and leading to a pigheaded insistence on error (Ess, "Disputationspraxis"; Montgomery, *Al-Jāhīz* 209). Solitary authorship provided a unique opportunity for "repose from the mischief of the opponent," where for the first time the opponent's arguments could be fully appreciated, distilled into cool logic without the passion and heat of the debate forum. Once internalized, they could then be incorporated into the authorial system, resulting in a new notion of the scholar as author: a single person who could claim impartiality after having considered all doctrines, systems, methods, and opinions.

Al-Jāhīz often apologizes to his reader about his book's organization. I would like to reframe this discourse of worry as a performative demonstration of his own authorial justice. As an author of published books, he needed to show that he was maintaining his vigilance and that he did indeed consider possible objections at every turn. In this way, he used an imagined reader to play the role of the absent critical opponent. Al-Jāhīz's method explicitly resists technical terminology, turning instead to a rich and varied vocabulary, sometimes even for technical topics. This makes it difficult to select a single Arabic term to designate his concept of authorial justice. I propose here the term *إنصاف* (*inṣāf*), with the caveat that al-Jāhīz often makes relevant points under the heading of a range of semantically related terms like *تقسيم* (*taqsīṭ*; "allotment"), *عدل* (*'adl*; also typically translated as "justice"), *حصص* (*ḥiṣṣa*; "shares"), and *حق* (*ḥaqq*; "a claim to something" or "the deserving of something" or even "truth"). To some

degree I have synthesized his theory by drawing together comments that appear under various headings, but the main passages use the term *inṣāf*. Because it is not a technical term, it sometimes means authorial justice, sometimes epistemic justice, and sometimes just justice. In this short essay I aim to introduce the interrelation of these meanings to clarify the epistemological and ethical ramifications of al-Jāḥiẓ's understanding of authorship.

Inṣāf and Intellectual Leadership

Al-Jāḥiẓ was a leading figure among the Muʿtazilah, practitioners of a dominant branch of dialectical theology (كلام; *kalām*) that was until 847 CE closely associated with the Abbasid center of power. *Kalām* was a method for logically defending the tenets of Islam in dispute with non-Muslims and for settling debates within the Muslim community. Developed before the widespread introduction of Aristotelian logic into the Arabic-speaking world, it did not use syllogisms until centuries later, instead relying on a question-and-answer method of dialectic. Any *kalām* leader responsible for defending a system of philosophical ideas had to be able to answer questions publicly without getting trapped in a contradiction. The *kalām* method thus involved asking a series of questions designed to reveal contradictions inherent in the system. It typically used a specialized, technical terminology and relied on carefully analyzing the wording of claims.

The new epistemology that al-Jāḥiẓ proposed expanded the scope of *kalām* beyond dialectical method and beyond its traditional topics. Instead, he defined it as a theory and method for the study of everything, incorporating the empiricism of medicine and the calculus of probabilities in Islamic legal theory, and prying open the rigid operations of technical dialectic to think through idiom, metaphor, and exception (al-Jāḥiẓ, *Risālah* 4: 243–50; see Miller, *Quibbler*). As a result, his writing sometimes has a postmodern feel, producing the uncomfortable sense that science and philosophy have somehow been invaded by literature, with its more expansive approach to language. His method leaned heavily on the individual thinker's capacity for

justice, so that thought ceased to be conceived as depersonalized argument and became intertwined with the character of the thinker. In al-Jāḥiẓ's view, *inṣāf* was the standard determining who deserved intellectual leadership and public influence. In this sense, it was also a political concept.

While discussing errant interpretations of the Qur'an, al-Jāḥiẓ spends a few paragraphs in a brief aside addressing intellectual leadership:

أقول إنه لولا مكان المتكلمين لهلكت العوالم من جميع الأمم، ولولا مكان المعتزلة لهلكت العوالم من جميع النحل.
(*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* 4: 206.11–12)

My position is that if not for the role of the *kalām* scholars, the populace would perish in every nation. And if not for the role of the Muʿtazilah, the populace would perish in every [Muslim] sect.

Society depends on its intellectual leaders, defined here as dialectical theologians. (It is ambiguous, but “perishing” may here be construed as spiritual ruin and the loss of heavenly reward.) The passage then defines what it takes to be an intellectual leader, emphasizing that this is a contested doctrine, publicly espoused by al-Jāḥiẓ himself.

أنا أزع أن الناس يحتاجون بدياً إلى طبيعة ثم إلى معرفة ثم إلى إنصاف.
(4: 207.2–3)

My claim is that people need first [a good] humoral temperament, then knowledge, and then justice [*inṣāf*].

A leader needed the correct balance of physical humors in the body, following Hippocratic medical theory, to avoid angry outbursts, lethargy, or despair. But the good character produced by a balanced humoral temperament was not enough, even when combined with knowledge. Both temperament and knowledge were, rather, prerequisites for developing the quality that did serve as the criterion for intellectual leadership: *inṣāf*. It is significant that al-Jāḥiẓ separates the virtue of justice from the bundle of virtues represented in humoral temperament, for those too had a role in cognition, according to him. Al-Jāḥiẓ's philosophy limited truly rational

thought to a vanishingly small group of intellectual elites characterized by their perfect humoral temperament; most of what seems to be rational deduction was in his view in fact inference from experience with a veneer of logical argument added after the fact (al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-Masā'il*; see Bernand, “Critique,” “Notion” [1972], “Notion” [1973], and “Savoir”; Ess, “Ġāhīz”; Vajda).

Al-Jāhīz then defines the virtue of justice as follows:

أول ما ينبغي أن يبتدئ به صاحبُ الإنصاف أمره ألا يعطي نفسه فوق حقه، وألا يضعها دون مكانها، وأن يتحفظ من شينين، فإن نجاته لا تتم إلا بالتحفظ منهما: أحدهما تهمة الإلف، والآخر تهمة السابق إلى القلب — الله الموفق .

(*Kitāb al-Hayawān* 4: 207.3–6)

The first thing a just person [*sāhib al-inṣāf*] must do is to not grant himself more than he deserves, nor place himself lower than he deserves, and to be vigilant about two things, for his salvation is complete only through vigilance against both: one is to suspect familiarity and the other is to suspect what flies first to the heart. Success is by the grace of God.

There are two distinct components listed here: one is an impartial assessment of oneself, and the other is an impartial assessment of oneself, and the other is *taḥaffuz* (“vigilance”) in all other areas, leading one to interrogate familiar ideas and assumptions, including slick rhetoric that might bypass critical thinking to attain easy acceptance. Both vigilance and self-criticism fall under the heading of epistemic justice, and they form an integral part of the method he was proposing. This combination of habits could be glossed as humility, open-mindedness, and skepticism. In his closing prayer, al-Jāhīz rhetorically signals how challenging it is to attain epistemic justice: “Success is by the grace of God.”

Just Self-Assessment in Debate and in Writing

Let me return to the scene of debate. One would think that justice would be exhibited paradigmatically by a judge in this scenario, but in fact the judge’s equanimity is not typically discussed. Instead, ninth-century discussions of justice in debate contexts seem to derive from earlier

discussions of justice in poetry: certain pre-Islamic and early Islamic war poems acquired fame for their equanimous treatment of the enemies of the poet’s tribe. Political poetry was so typically partisan that equanimity was enough to earn a poem fame. Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 819 or 820), for example, relates how a particular poem by the pre-Islamic poet al-Mufaḍḍāl al-Nukrī came to be known as *qasīdat al-munṣaf* (“his just poem”; 548).³ It was perhaps in response to this notion of justice in poetry, where there was no judge, that al-Jāhīz discusses justice as primarily an attribute of the debater.

وليس في الأرض خصمان يتنازعا إلى حاكم، إلا كل واحدٍ منهما يدعي عدمَ الإنصاف والظلم على صاحبه. وليس في الأرض إنسانٌ إلا وهو يطرب من صوت نفسه، ويعتريه الغلط في شعره وفي ولده. إلا أن الناس في ذلك على طبقات من الغلط: فمنهم الغرق المغمور، ومنهم من قد نال من الصواب ونال من الخطب ومنهم من يكون خطؤه مستورا لكثرة صوابه، فما أحسن حاله ما لم يُمتحن بالكشف. ولذلك احتاج العاقل في العجب بولده، وفي استحسان كتيبه وشعره، من التحفظ والتوقي، ومن إعادة النظر والتهمة إلى أضعاف ما يحتاج إليه في سائر ذلك.

(*Kitāb al-Hayawān* 2: 106.4–13)

Whenever two adversaries contend before a judge, each accuses the other of a lack of impartiality [*inṣāf*] coupled with injustice [*ẓulm*].

There is no person on earth who does not experience ecstatic delight [*yaṭrab*]⁴ at the sound of his own voice, and suffer from error in [assessing the merit of] his poetry and his child.

Still, people are in [different] levels of error in this matter: some are totally submerged and drowning; some are granted a portion of correct [assessment] and a portion of error; some are so often correct that their error is hidden—and how beautiful is their state, as long as they are never examined or tested.

So the rational person [*al-‘āqil*] requires many times more vigilance, circumspection, reconsideration, and suspicion when it comes to his child or the assessment of his writing and poetry than he does in other matters.

Al-Jāhīz suggests that the justice demonstrated in debate is the same virtue that reins in self-infatuation when writing. Justice here is an

epistemic virtue in that it affects cognition, its absence producing طبقات من الغلط (“different levels of error”). It is noteworthy that among the various levels al-Jāhīz mentions, there is no category for people with perfect justice. Even the عاقل (“rational person”) needs to employ التحفظ والتوقّي وإعادة النظر (“vigilance, circumspection, reconsideration, and suspicion”). Justice is not achieved but rather approximated.

In practice, this self-critical vigilance looked like equivocation, caveat, and self-correction. One example is al-Jāhīz’s routine expression of ambivalence about the structure of his books. In his major rhetorical compendium البيان والتبيين (*al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*; *Clarity and Clarification*), al-Jāhīz does not provide a focused definition of the key term بيان (“clarity”) until seventy-five printed pages into the work, and comments:

وكان في الحق أن يكون هذا الباب في أول هذا الكتاب، ولكننا أخرناها لبعض التدبير.

(*al-Bayān* 1: 76.17–18)

This chapter deserved to go at the start of this book, but we postponed it for a certain purpose.

Such equivocations are ever-present and reflect not al-Jāhīz’s “disorderly” and “digressive” writing style (Pellat), nor his inability to organize his work because of illness or a frenetic urge to document his vast knowledge (Būmalḥam 305). Instead, they were a demonstration of the author’s balanced consideration of competing concerns and his self-critical openness about the objective challenges of writing a book.

Scenes of Debate: Justice and Knowledge

Aside from impartial self-assessment, the other component of epistemic justice is an evenhanded approach to other things. Al-Jāhīz’s descriptions of justice include political examples like how to correctly يوازن (*yuwāzin*; “weigh between”) the merits of various public figures, social groups, and so on, a task directly germane to sensitive issues like the contested caliphal succession and ethnic tensions within the Abbasid military (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* 1:

25.2–7 and 200.13–17). But his descriptions also include a significant body of more abstract epistemological principles, stemming from his innovative attempt to transform the discipline of dialectical theology (*kalām*). Intellectual justice allowed scholars to apportion their attention fairly when inferring from unlimited empirical information. It let them navigate the unmapped slippages between technical and ordinary language and to correctly use and interpret semantic extension (اتساع اللغة; *ittisā‘ al-lughah*) and metaphor. It let them manage thresholds like the one between certainty and طبقات (“degrees of doubt”; 6: 37.3) when making inferences from repeated experience (تجربة; *tajribah*), as well the threshold between the more and the less preferred in deliberative and comparative reasoning.

Al-Jāhīz routinely presents intellectual life overall as a mental balancing act, where correctness is not a conclusion but rather a process. A concise example is his discussion of causality. Al-Jāhīz writes that someone who يصلح للرياسة (“is fit for intellectual leadership”) should be a master of the sometimes conflicting methods of theology and natural science (“the two types of *kalām*” in Montgomery’s translation below):⁵

وليس يكون المتكلم جامعاً لأقطار الكلام متمكناً في الصناعة يصلح للرياسة، حتى يكون الذي يحسن من كلام الدين في وزن الذي يحسن من كلام الفلسفة. والعالم عندنا هو الذي يجمعهما، والمصيب هو الذي يجمع بين تحقيق التوحيد وإعطاء الطبائع حقائقها من الأعمال. . . . ولعمري إن في الجمع بينهما لبعض الشدة. وأنا أعود بالله تعالى أن أكون كلما غمز قناتي باب من الكلام صغبت المدخل، نقضت ركناً من أركان مقالتي!

(*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* 2: 134.14–15, 135.6–8)

The *kalām* practitioner can only combine the fields of *kalām*, achieve facility in the craft, and be fit for leadership when he is as adept in theology as he is in natural science. In our view, a true scholar is someone who combines the two. Someone who is properly qualified verifies divine unicity while also granting the natural elements their real effects. . . . But, my word! It is no mean feat to combine the two types of *kalām*. I ask God to protect me from being one who demolishes my foundational positions whenever my spear is pinched, as in a

spear straightener, by an impenetrable question in *kalām*.

(Montgomery, “Al-Ġāḥiẓ” 88; trans. modified)⁶

Al-Jāḥiẓ here references a theological debate about whether it impinges on the oneness of God, as the ultimate cause of all things, to say that natural elements have real effects. Instead of restating the already well-known Aristotelian idea that events have multiple causes, including both primary causality (God made it happen) and secondary causality (the laws of nature made it happen), al-Jāḥiẓ depicts a drama in which thinkers are torn between two truths that can scarcely be thought simultaneously. One thinker holds fast to primary causality and loses secondary causality, فقد حمل عجزه على الكلام في التوحيد (“attributing his own inadequacy to the doctrine of divine unicity”; *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* 2: 134.16–135.1), while another holds fast to secondary causality and loses primary causality. Both are incorrect, their doctrines reflecting not the truth but only their own incapacity as thinkers to conceive both kinds of causality at once. Al-Jāḥiẓ prays for the fortitude to hold fast to both foundational doctrines throughout his work.

In this scene, it is not two debaters competing but rather the two doctrines themselves that struggle in the mind of the thinker. In another example, al-Jāḥiẓ defends scholars studying the natural world for their heroic efforts to balance their attention and fulfill what is owed to every component of creation:

فحين أراءوا أن يُقسَطُوا بينَ الجميع بالحصص، ويغدلوا بينَ الكلِّ بإعطاء كلِّ شيء نصيبه، حتى يقع التعديلُ شاملاً، والتقسيطُ جامعاً، يظهرُ بذلك الخفيُّ من الحكم

(*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* 1: 218.10–12)

When their aim is to allocate the totality in shares, treating the entirety fairly by giving everything its due, so that justice [*ta’dīl*] is inclusive and allocation comprehensive, it is in this way that hidden wisdom appears. . . .

(my trans.; see also Montgomery, *Al-Jāḥiẓ* 414)

Al-Jāḥiẓ here defends the study of the natural world, despite its inexhaustible detail, against the

attacks of an opponent who advocates prioritizing the knowledge that is most relevant for politics and theology, leaving aside trivial topics like animals, since

صار هذا الضرب من النظر عوضاً من النظر في التوحيد
(*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* 1: 200.13)

this type of investigation would displace the investigation of the unicity of God.

Al-Jāḥiẓ’s response draws on contemporaneous debates about empiricism, particularly the defense of empirical study against the critique that particulars are unknowable because they are infinite (or, as al-Jāḥiẓ maintained, because they are finite but far too numerous for the human mind to encompass).

Al-Jāḥiẓ and most of his contemporaries included “correspondence to reality” in their definition of certain knowledge. The existence of an all-knowing God suggested that a single truth existed, even if it was not always knowable to humans. However, the early ninth century also saw the rise of a multidisciplinary speculative impulse to theorize the validity and authority of uncertain human knowledge even when it might not correspond to the objective truth known to God. In law, *hadith* analysis, medicine, and even theology, scholars were using method as the criterion to define knowledge that was valid and actionable despite its uncertainty (El Shamsy 22–87). Al-Jāḥiẓ’s epistemology fits within this trend. But his method’s reliance on epistemic justice blurred the line between method and character, because justice is ultimately a virtue exhibited by an individual. In this sense, he came close to a theory of virtue epistemology (see Battaly). Two elements of al-Jāḥiẓ’s writings are designed to demonstrate and inculcate the habits of thought that al-Jāḥiẓ associates with intellectual justice: his unique authorial voice and his famously idiosyncratic compilation structure.

Al-Jāḥiẓ was the first Arabic-language author to sustain a distinct authorial voice throughout book-length compositions. A key feature of his authorial voice is a style that is lush with caveats, exceptions,

and various other forms of qualification and equivocation. He uses stylistic techniques of self-correction to performatively demonstrate the just balance he is striking between different principles and approaches. Consider the following discussion of ant cognition. Al-Jāhīz points out that ants plan for the future, communicate, cooperate, and so on. They engage in reasoning similar to human reasoning, except for a difference in degree: their reasoning falls short of the threshold that would impart moral responsibility.

فَأَرَيْتَكَ مَا عِنْدَهُ مِنَ الْجَسِّ اللَّطِيفِ وَالتَّقْدِيرِ الْغَرِيبِ، وَمَنِ النَّظَرِ فِي الْعَوَاقِبِ، وَمَشَاكِلَةِ الْإِنْسَانِ وَمَزَاحِمَتِهِ. وَالْإِنْسَانُ هُوَ الَّذِي سُخِّرَ لَهُ هَذَا الْفَلَكُ بِمَا يَشْتَمَلُ عَلَيْهِ.

(*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* 4: 5.9–11)

We have shown you what fine senses and amazing judgment [the ant] has, its ability to predict consequences, and its resemblance and adjacency to humans. But humanity is the one to whom this celestial sphere and all it encompasses is subjected.

Al-Jāhīz interrupts himself to remind the reader of a core doctrine, supported by the Qur'anic term سُخِّرَ (“subjected” or “made serviceable”), drawn from a verse stating that the world was created for the benefit of humans (Qur'an 31.20; see Tlili 92–115). His message is that it is wrong to ignore ant cognition, which can be observed in the natural world, but it is also wrong to forget the significance of human reason's superiority, clarified by dialectical theological argument. Al-Jāhīz here shows us how to practice the “double vision” of epistemic justice, using the literary technique of the caveat. Elsewhere, he discusses the same topic of animal cognition with reference to the idiomatic use of language:

وكذلك قال الشاعر الذي وصفها بالعقل، وإنما قال ذلك على التشبيه، فليس للشاعر إطلاق هذا الكلام لها، وليس لك أن تمنعها ذلك من كل جهة وفي كل حال.

(*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* 7: 57.4–6, 58.5–7)

This is how the poet spoke who ascribed reason to them. But he said this only in the way of comparison. So, it is not right for the poet to ascribe this language

to them absolutely; nor is it right for you to deprive them of it from every angle and in every case.

In other words, metaphoric or idiomatic language has a place in the analysis, even when it ascribes reason to animals, contrary to a core doctrine held by al-Jāhīz himself. I have made some suggestions elsewhere about what conceptual content is supplied by these idioms that he insists on (Miller, “Man”). He makes his point through the rhetorical construction of a conflict between the disciplinary approaches of a poet and “you,” presumably a dialectical theologian, and then insisting on a just balance between them.

In practice, al-Jāhīz often used idiomatic Arabic for his intellectual work, even to work through theologically significant doctrines. His uncomfortable combination of idiom and logic can be seen as a performance of his own authorial justice. In his formal taxonomy of being, for example, al-Jāhīz riffs on Aristotle's definition of humans as a *حي ناطق* (“speaking animal”) by instead dividing animals into *فصيح* (“eloquent”—that is, humans) and *أعجم* (“ineloquent” or “speaking like a foreigner”—that is, nonhuman animals), out of respect for the idiomatic Arabic expressions represented in the Qur'an and in poetry that refer to animal communication as *منطق* (*mantiq*; “logic” or “speech”), the same word used to translate the Greek word *logos* into Arabic. This is one component of a powerful, though not entirely avowed, rhetorical dismantling of the Aristotelian principle of univocality in logic (Miller, “Man”).

Al-Jāhīz's notion of intellectual justice is also central to how he organized his books—more important, in fact, than his explicitly aesthetic concepts of “masonry” (organization by topic), “embroidery” (the inclusion of ample citation from the literary canon), and “intercalation” (the alternation of sections designated as jest and earnest). While al-Jāhīz seems to have come up with these craft metaphors himself, the practices he describes reflect widespread practices of his day. Various disciplines were beginning to organize information into chapters by topic, in a practice typically called *تصنيف* (“dividing by type”), and practices of citing the canon were simultaneously

developing in epistolary and compilatory genres. However, it is characteristic of al-Jāhīz specifically that he poses these ninth-century composition principles as being in conflict with one another and therefore requiring the author to personally balance between them in a kind of hopeless striving for a perfection available only to God.

Al-Jāhīz writes that he tried to organize his voluminous كتاب الحيوان (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān; Book of Animals*) into chapters, animal by animal, following the principle of dividing by type, which he calls masonry. The metaphor treats each chapter as a block, comparable to the other chapters, each abutting its neighbors. He found, however, that this was impossible, because of the varied amount of subject matter available regarding each animal. The chapters did not match in the way that masonry stones did. So little was known about certain animals like the stoat that al-Jāhīz had to group many little-known creatures together into a single chapter, whereas more familiar animals like the camel inspired a quantity of material that was simply too overwhelming to include at all. Al-Jāhīz poses this as a tension between embroidery and masonry, since the citations (embroidery) expand the extent of the already-capacious knowledge on the camel beyond what could be attested in a single lifetime. As with empirical knowledge more broadly, complete knowledge of the canon was out of reach of the human knower, and so the author had to strike a balance. At the start of the book, al-Jāhīz explains that it will not be a partisan book, but rather will include جملة المذاهب (“the totality of all the systems and doctrines”; 1: 25.12). This fantasy of totality or completeness is of course impossible to achieve, but the author’s justice at least allows for an approximation.

Al-Jāhīz’s aspiration to include all approaches operated at a political level and connects back to the author’s obligation to adequately represent the opponent. Al-Jāhīz often reiterates a requirement that all competing voices be heard. In point of fact there are deafening silences in his compilations, but his claim for universal audibility had long-reaching effects. Al-Jāhīz has been described as one of the chief contributors to the Abbasid cultural

synthesis that combined the cultural heritage of its component ethnicities, religions, and languages, as well as the culture and intellectual disciplines of preceding empires, to produce the outlines of a cosmopolitan Islamic imperial culture that would remain fairly stable for a millennium despite dramatic historical changes and cultural developments (Amīn 1: 391–403). In the end, his idea of epistemic justice was not taken up by the later theological tradition, but his multivolume books demonstrating intellectual justice in practice became an important foundation of the Arabic literary and philological tradition.

Al-Jāhīz and Epistemic Justice Today

Miranda Fricker has recently brought epistemic injustice to the fore in philosophy, defining it as “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (1). Her main examples are testimonial injustice, where a speaker is deemed less believable because of prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (1). She cites the example of someone trying to make sense of sexual harassment before language for this experience was developed. The concept draws on recent explorations of the social aspect of knowledge. Fricker then proposes the epistemic virtue of intellectual justice as a partial, moment-to-moment corrective. For the case of testimonial justice, she characterizes epistemic justice as “a process of self-critical maturation and adaptation . . . [to] increasingly approximate virtue as a hearer” (84). Laura Beeby encapsulates Fricker’s account of epistemic justice overall as a “critical self-awareness or capacity for self-checking” (235–36). While Fricker acknowledges the limited scope of individual virtue for correcting fundamentally social problems, her work has still been criticized as overestimating the importance of epistemic justice in the face of long-standing and deep-rooted institutional and societal injustices (Beeby).

It is thought-provoking to find that many of the specific elements of epistemic justice in al-Jāhīz’s theory correspond to the correctives proposed by

philosophers today as checks on epistemic injustices: a critique of bivalent logic and its fantasy of disambiguated philosophical language (Chimakonam); a return to thinking with idiomatic speech (“philosophizing in tongues” in Cassin’s terminology [see 246–58]); and a vigilant practice of “critical self-awareness” and “self-checking” (Beeby), including humility (Snow), skepticism (Hazlett), and open-mindedness (Riggs). Yet in al-Jāhīz’s view, justice had nothing to do with social equity. A mouthpiece of the Abbasid caliphs, he defended the theological محنة (“inquisition”) from 833 to 847 CE and was concerned with supporting empire and enforcing a unified theological doctrine. He was extraordinarily elitist, even for his time, and especially so in his estimation of the intellectual abilities of most people. His example may provide a check on our optimism about the efficacy of individual efforts to voluntarily develop the intellectual virtue of epistemic justice (Fricker). At the same time, his rigor in exploring multivocal intellectual styles and a form of multivalent logic may provide fresh inspiration in an area of interest now returning to the fore.

NOTES

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1. In all cases where I have modified translations by Montgomery, this is because he has done the lion’s share of interpreting these difficult passages, but I have preferred a different interpretation of some component. I have also replaced technical diction while retaining turns of phrase that bear the mark of Montgomery’s voice. Brackets indicate words supplied in the English that are not explicitly represented in the Arabic.

2. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

3. For the full poem, see al-Aṣma‘ī 199–203. I am grateful to Pamela Klasova for pointing me to the category of “just poetry.”

4. See Christian Junge’s essay in this issue of *PMLA*.

5. This may be in either al-Jāhīz’s voice or that of صاحب الكلب (“the proponent of the dog”).

6. See also the translation and discussion in Crone 76.

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