AL-ĀMIRĪ ON VISION AND THE VISIBLE. VARIATIONS ON TRADITIONAL VISUAL THEORIES

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The main body of Greek scientific and philosophical writings which reached the Arabic-Islamic world from the ninth century onwards included material on visual and optical theories. The most famous Muslim philosophers, namely al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd all dealt with the various Greek theories of vision and added their own views. And so did Abū l-Ḥasan al-Āmīrī (d. 992), who might be less famous, but not less interesting. He gives his account on vision in a separate work, Risālat al-qawl fī ‘l-ibṣār wa’t-mubṣar. The treatise has more or less gone unnoticed until now, so the present paper shall be a first step towards altering this situation and shall point out, among other things, a striking textual parallel to Abū l-Æasan ibn Isḥaq hitherto unnoticed.

As information about al-Āmīrī is rather scarce and only few of his writings are known to be extant, we might be at a loss how to assess the position of the Ibṣār within al-Āmīrī’s work. Fortunately, however, the author himself explicitly states the purpose of this treatise: he wants to complete the account of his epistemology by adding what is still missing, namely a presentation of the insight (baṣar wa-ra’ya) granted by the senses.


3 In modern research literature Paul Kraus was the first to acknowledge the existence of the Ibṣār in his review of Brockelmann’s *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur in Orientalia*, NS 6 (1937), pp. 283–9. In a personal letter to Franz Rosenthal (dated 29 July 1939), he expressed the intention to study the Ibṣār, as it “is an interesting treatise directed against the Kalam and dealing with optico-philosophical problems.” (F. Rosenthal, “State and Religion according to Abū l-Ḥasan al-Āmīrī,” *IQ* 3 [1956], p. 43). I have presented a preliminary version of the present paper at the *Symposium Graeco-Arabicum Quartum ‘The Arabic Aristotle’* at the University of Bochum on 4 February 2005.

4 Rasā’il, ed. Khalīfāt, p. 413. Additionally al-Āmīrī mentions in his preface that the motivation to write the Ibṣār was to answer to a “brother praiseworthy for his high
Al-ʿĀmirī discerns four kinds of insight (aqsām al-ḥaṣar waʿl-ruʿya):

- The bodily part or kind (al-qism al-jusdānī): it is the insight perceived by the five senses and common to man and animal. The broad mass of people knows and uses this kind of insight and its philosophical discussion is the object of al-ʿĀmirī’s Iḥṣār.

- The intellectual one (al-qism al-aqlī) is the insight of the sound intellects (ruʿyat al-uqūl al-sāḥīha) by which they take hold of the universal concepts (al-maʿānī l-kullīyya). As al-ʿĀmirī states, he has already dealt with the intellectual insight in his Tafsīr li-Kitāb al-burhān, a commentary on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics.

- The holy one (al-qism al-qudsī) is the insight of the holy spirits (al-arwāḥ al-muqaddasa) by which they grasp what can be deduced from the spiritual substances. Among men this insight is granted only to the prophets, and therefore al-ʿĀmirī has discussed it when talking about prophecy in his Kitāb al-irshād li-taʾīd al-ʾitqād.

- The imaginative one (al-qism al-wahmī) is the insight of the rational souls (al-nuqsās al-nāfiqa) due to their imaginative powers (al-quwāʾ l-mutakhayyila). It is perceived while sleeping or being awake, by natural disposition or by a special skill (ṣināʿa). Al-ʿĀmirī has explained this part in the fourth chapter of his Kitāb al-nask al-ʿaqīlī waʿl-taṣawwuf al-millī.

Although al-ʿĀmirī has thus, according to his own account, discussed all the relevant parts of his epistemology, its reconstruction proves nevertheless difficult, since apart from the Iḥṣār all abovementioned rank in wisdom” who had asked for an explanation of vision and related subjects (ibid., p. 411).

5 For instance al-ʿĀmirī’s criterion for distinguishing between intellects (uqūl) and spirits (arwāḥ) remains doubtful. Spirits seem to be an elevated and inspired kind of intellects—the intellects of prophets and angels. In al-ʿĀmirī’s Kitāb al-ʿamād ṭabāʿ l-ḥab (A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate, ed. and trans. E. Rowson [New Haven, 1988], pp. 104–5) the holy spirit (rūḥ muqaddasa) is said to be the soul in the “extreme degree in elevation” (al-ghāya fi ṭarafa), namely when having reached the rank of prophecy by its noblest power, that is “the power of adopting the best of what lies within the limits of possibility” (quwwat al-ḥārā tashdīl mā fī taraṣṣuf al-iskān). In his commentary to this passage (ibid., p. 273) Rowson points out that in al-ʿĀmirī’s Kitāb al-ṭārīm bi-manāḏib al-ʾādām (ed. A. Ghuribh [Cairo, 1967], p. 296) two different kinds of spirits are distinguished: the rational (nawṣiyā) spirits, by which the Intellect is reached, and the holy (qudsiyā) ones, which are peculiar to the prophets. Unfortunately the manuscript of the Fāmūn is illegible hereafter, so we can not tell which kind of elevation (iqāma) is reached by the holy spirits.