al-Rāzī

(3,876 words)

Abū Bakr Muhammad b. Zakariyyāʾ, known to the Latins as Rhazes (ca. 250/854-313/925 or 323/935), physician, philosopher and alchemist.

The most free-thinking of the major philosophers of Islam, al-Rāzī was born in Rayy, where he was well trained in the Greek sciences. He was reputedly well versed in musical theory and performance before becoming a physician. His work in alchemy takes a new, more empirical and naturalistic approach than that of the Greeks or Dījābir, and he brought the same empirical spirit to medicine. Immersed in the Galenic tradition, and apparently even conversant with Greek (al-Bīrūnī ascribes to him translations and abridgements from the Greek and even a poem “in the Greek language”), al-Rāzī greatly profited from the Arabic translations of Greek medical and philosophical texts. He headed the hospital of Rayy before assuming the corresponding post in Baghdād. His property in the vicinity seems to have brought him back often to Rayy, and he died there, somewhat embittered and alienated, partly by the loss of his eyesight. Like many of the great physicians of Islam, al-Rāzī was a courtier as well as a scholar, clinician and teacher. His medical handbook the Manṣūrī, translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona in the 12th century, was dedicated to Mansūr b. Ishāk, the Sāmānīd governor of Rayy; his Mulūkī or Regius, to ‘Alī b. Wāhsūdān of Ṭabaristān. The author of some two hundred books, al-Rāzī claims in his apologia, the Sīra al-falsafīyya, or “Philosophical Way of Life”, that his has been a life of moderation, excessive only in his devotion to learning; he associated with princes never as a man at arms or an officer of state but always, and only, as a physician and a friend. He was constantly writing. In one year, he urges, he wrote over twenty thousand pages, “in a hand like an amulet maker’s.” Others remark on his generosity and compassion, seeing that the poor among his patients were properly fed and given adequate nursing care. Arriving patients first saw an outer circle of disciples, and then an inner circle, if these could not aid them, leaving al-Rāzī himself to treat the hardest cases. His medical research was similarly methodical, as revealed in his notebooks. These were
He also wrote essays on such subjects as “The reasons for people's preference of inferior physicians,” “A mistaken view of the function of the physician,” “Why some people leave a physician if he is intelligent,” “That an intelligent physician cannot heal all diseases, since that is not possible,” and “Why ignorant physicians, common folk, and women in the cities are more successful than scientists in treating certain diseases—and the physician's excuse for this.” He also argued that sound practice demands independent thinking. His own clinical records, he reports, do not confirm Galen's descriptions of the course of a fever. And in some cases he finds that his clinical experience exceeds Galen's. He rejects the notion, central to the theory of humours, that the body is warmed or cooled only by warmer or cooler bodies; for a warm drink may heat the body to a degree much hotter than its own. Thus the drink must trigger a response rather than simply communicating its own warmth or coldness. This line of criticism has the potential, in time, to bring down the whole theory of humours and the scheme of the four elements, on which it was grounded. Al-Rāzi's alchemy, like his medical thinking, struggles within the cocoon of hylomorphism. It dismisses the idea of potions and dispenses with an appeal to magic, if magic means reliance on symbols as causes. But al-Rāzi does not reject the idea that there are wonders in the sense of unexplained phenomena in nature. His alchemical stockroom, accordingly, is enriched with the products of Persian mining and manufacture, and the Chinese discovery, sal ammoniac. Still reliant on the idea of dominant forms or essences and thus on the Neoplatonic conception of causality as inherently intellectual rather than mechanical, al-Rāzi's alchemy nonetheless brings to the fore such empiric qualities as salinity and inflammability—the latter ascribed to “oiliness” and “sulphurousness”. Such properties are not readily explained by the traditional fire, water, earth and air schematism, as al-Ghazālī and other later comers, primed by thoughts like al-Rāzi's, were quick to note.

Like Galen, al-Rāzi was speculatively interested in the art and profession of medicine. He wrote essays on such subjects as “The reasons for people’s preference of inferior physicians,” “A mistaken view of the function of the physician,” “Why some people leave a physician if he is intelligent,” “That an intelligent physician cannot heal all diseases, since that is not possible,” and “Why ignorant physicians, common folk, and women in the cities are more successful than scientists in treating certain diseases—and the physician's excuse for this.” He also...
shared Galen's interest in philosophy and heeded his treatise, “That the outstanding physician must also be a philosopher.” Al-Bīrūnī lists some eighty philosophical titles in his al-Rāzī bibliography, and al-Nadīm lists dozens of his works on logic, cosmology, theology, mathematics and alchemy. Given the general repugnance toward al-Rāzī's philosophical ideas among his contemporaries and medieval successors, few of these works were copied. But fragments survive in quotations by later authors, as do the Sūra al-falsafīyya and the Ṭībb al-rūḥānī, the “Spiritual physick” or “Psychological medicine,” which embodies al-Rāzī's largely Epicurean ethical system. Among the writings of which we have mention are: a commentary on Plato's Timaeus, perhaps based on the epitome of Galen, a rebuttal of Iamblichus' response to Porphyry's Letter to Anebos (that is, the De mysteriis), an appraisal of the Īṣārī, a critique of Mu'tazilism, another on the infallible Īṣā'īli Imām, a work on how to measure intelligence, an introduction to and vindication of algebra, a defence of the incorporeality of the soul, a debate with a Manichaean, and an explanation of the difficulty people have in accepting the sphericity of the earth when they are not trained in rigorous demonstration. Other works deal with eros, coitus, nudity and clothing, the fatal effects of the Simoom (or simply, of poisons, sumūm, cf. Sezgin, GAS, iii, 289 no. 32) on animal life, the seasons of autumn and spring, the wisdom of the Creator, and the reason for the creation of savage beasts and reptiles. One work defends the proposition that God does not interfere with the actions of other agents. Another rebuts the claim that the earth revolves. Al-Rāzī discussed the innate or intrinsic character of motion, a sensitive point at the juncture between Democritean and Aristotelian physics. He wrote several treatments of the nature of matter, and one on the unseen causes of motion. His exposé of the risks of ignoring the axioms of geometry may aim at kalām defenders of dimensionless atoms; and his book on the diagonal of the square may have defended his own atomism against the ancient charge, first levelled at Pythagoreanism, that atomism is refuted by the demonstrated incommensurability of a square's side with its diagonal; for al-Rāzī's acceptance of the void and rejection of Aristotle's doctrine of the relativity of space disarms that charge, since al-Rāzī's absolute space is a Euclidean continuum and need not, like his matter, be composed of discrete, indivisible quanta.

The Ṭībb al-rūḥānī, written for al-Manṣūr as a companion to the Manṣūrī, develops a moderately ascetic ideal of life from the premise that all pleasures presuppose a prior pain (or dislocation). This means that peace of mind or lack of perturbation is the optimum of pleasure, as al-Rāzī explains in his widely-cited lost work on pleasure. Pleasures cannot be amassed or hoarded, and what some hedonists might think of as “peak experiences” are reached only by traversing a corresponding valley. To feed an appetite, moreover, is only to enlarge it. So the attempt to maximise one's happiness by serving the appetites and passions is a self-defeating strategy, as Plato showed when he argued that such a life is comparable to trying to carry water in a sieve. Epicurus took that argument very much to heart when he sought to devise a hedonistic alternative to the sybaritic outlook of the Cyrenaic philosophers, and al-Rāzī does so as well. His ethical treatise follows al-Kindī's precedent in treating ethics as a kind of psychic medicine or clinical psychology, an approach later used by Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides. But the basis of the art in question, which is the Socratic tendance of the
Wisdom, then, springs not from the thought of death, as many philosophers and pious teachers have supposed, but from overcoming that thought. For, even more than the appetites themselves, the fear of death is the goad of the passions that hamper human rationality and undermine human happiness. As al-Rāzi explains: “As long as the fear of death persists, one will incline away from reason and toward passion (hawā’).” The argument is Epicurean. The passions here, as in Epicurus, are thought of as neuroses, compulsions, pleasureless addictions, to use al-Rāzi’s description (his word for an addict is mudmin). The glutton, the miser, even the sexual obsessive, are, by al-Rāzi’s analysis, as much moved by the fear of death as by natural appetites. For natural needs, as Epicurus would explain, are always in measure. The unwholesome excess that makes vice a disease comes from the irrational and unselfconscious mental linking of natural pleasures and gratifications with security, that is, a sense of freedom from the fear of death. Ethics here becomes entirely prudential, as al-Rāzi’s critics were not slow to note. If we knew that our ultimate state was immortality, and the return of the soul in us to her true home, our mad scrabbling after the surrogates of immortality would cease. But the fear of death “can never be banished altogether from the soul, unless one is certain that after death it shifts to a better state.” And his conclusion is that it “would require very lengthy argumentation, if one sought proof rather than just allegations (khabar). There really is no method whatever for argument to adopt on this topic... The subject is too elevated and too broad as well as too long.... It would require examination of all faiths and rites that hold or imply beliefs about an afterlife and a verdict as to which are true and which are false”—a task al-Rāzi has no immediate or pressing intention of attempting. For practical purposes, then, he offers the Epicurean consolation that death is nothing to us, if the soul is really mortal. What scripture has to say on the subject is just another undemonstrated report, an unsubstantiated allegation.

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In his debates with an Ismā‘īlī adversary, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzi (d. 322/934 [q.v.]), chief lieutenant to the Ismā‘īlī dā‘ī of Rayy, and later chief dā‘ī himself, al-Rāzi faces a Mu‘tazilī argument that harks back to Stoic sources: God’s mercy would not deny humanity the guidance of leaders inspired with revealed knowledge of God’s own will and His plan for human destiny. Al-Rāzi answers that God has provided what we need to know, not in the arbitrary and divisive gift of special revelation, which only foments bloodshed and contention, but in reason, which belongs equally to all. Prophets are impostors, at best misled by the demonic shades of restless and envious spirits. But ordinary men are fully capable of thinking for themselves and need no guidance from another. One can see their intelligence and ingenuity in the crafts and devices by which they get their living, for it is here that they apply
their interest and their energy. Intellectuals who have not devoted their energies, say, to mechanical devices would be baffled by the skills and techniques of such men; but all human beings are capable of the independent thinking that is so critical to human destiny. It is only because the philosopher has applied himself to abstract speculations that he has attained some measure of understanding in intellectual matters.

Asked if a philosopher can follow a prophetically revealed religion, al-Rāzī openly retorts: “How can anyone think philosophically while committed to those old wives’ tales, founded on contradictions, obdurate ignorance, and dogmatism (mukim ʿalā ʾl-ikhtilāf, muṣIRR ʿalā ʾl-djahl wa ʾl-taklīd)?” Al-Rāzī takes issue with ritualism for what he sees as its obsession with unseen and unseeable sources of impurity; but he also combats the natural tendency of his contemporaries to think of philosophy as a dogmatic school or even a sect, their expectation that a philosopher should believe and behave as Socrates or Plato did. Like many philosophers, he has difficulty explaining to others that philosophical disagreements and divergences of outlook are not a scandal but a source of vitality. A philosopher, he urges, does not slavishly follow the actions and ideas of some master. One learns from one’s predecessors, to be sure, but the hope is to surpass them. Al-Rāzī admits that he will never be a Socrates, and cautions against anyone’s expecting in short order to rival Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Eudemus, Chrysippus, Themistius or Alexander of Aphrodisias. But he also affirms a belief in progress, at least for individuals, and denies that one is trapped within the teachings of the great founders of traditions: “You must realise,” he tells Abū Ḥātim, “that every later philosopher who commits himself creatively (idjtahada), diligently, and persistently to philosophical inquiry where subtle difficulties have led his predecessors to disagree, will understand what they understood and retain it, having a quick mind and much experience of thought and inquiry in other areas. Rapidly mastering what his predecessors knew and grasping the lessons they afford, he readily surpasses them. For inquiry, thought and originality make progress and improvement inevitable.” The smallest measure of original thought, even if it does not reach unrevisable truth, al-Rāzī insists, helps to free the soul from its thrall in this world and secure for us that immortality which was so wrongly described and so vainly promised by the prophets.

The Soul, al-Rāzī argues in such works as his Kitāb al-ʿIlm al-ilāhī or “Theology”, and On the five eternals, both now lost, but well represented by fragments, paraphrases, descriptions and refutations, was one of five eternal things that antedate the cosmos. The other four were God, matter, time and space. Space is the void. It may or may not have atoms in it. Time, like space, is absolute, not relative to bodies in motion, as in Aristotle. Being absolute, time is eternal. Motion is not. For matter, in itself, is inert; its motion stems from the activity of soul. Soul, the world soul, initially stood apart from matter, in a spiritual realm of her own. She yearned, however, to be embodied. And God, like a wise father, understanding that Soul learns only by experience, allowed her to embroil herself here, as a king might allow his headstrong son into a tempting but in many ways noxious garden, not out of ignorance, unconcern, or even powerlessness or spite, but out of understanding that only through experience will the boy’s restlessness abate. In the case of Soul’s entry into materiality, chaos was the first result,
as she set matter stirring in wild and disordered motion. God, in His grace, intervened, imparting intelligence of His own to the world that Soul's impetuous desire had formed. As an immanent principle, intelligence gave order to the world, stabilising its motions and rendering them comprehensible. But it also gave understanding to the Soul itself, allowing her to recognise her estrangement in this world and seek a return from exile. It is this striving for return that gives meaning to all human strivings in the realm of life.

Only by such a theory, al-Rāzī insists, can creationists hope to overcome the elenchus of the eternalists, who deny creation altogether. A quasi-gnostic quasi-Platonic formatio mundi, then, not creatio ex nihilo, is the sole workable hypothesis which al-Rāzī can offer on behalf of the world's temporal origination, as opposed to its eternal, Plotinian emanation or its perpetual existence as a Democritean or Epicurean mechanism. Clearly the materialists, al-Rāzī reasons, improperly ignore the life and intelligence that course through nature, giving directed and stable movement to otherwise inert and passive matter. As for the Neoplatonic Aristotelians, their theory of emanation leads them to fudge (as Aristotle had done) on the inertness of matter. For, by treating the natural order as eternal, they seem to make motion and ordering form inherent properties of matter, rather than imparted acts and powers, as Neoplatonic principles should require. Only the affirmation of a temporal origin, which al-Rāzī unabashedly adopts from scripture and from the concurring authority of Plato's Timaeus, seems to do justice to the fact that nature's order is not intrinsic but imparted; and only a temporal creation does justice to the unimpeded operation of the forces of nature and the self-governing actions of human intelligence and will. For these gifts were given long ago and are not, as in Neoplatonism, timelessly imparted without ever really departing from their Source.

But although creation involves a kind of gift, al-Rāzī cannot treat the act of creation as a sheer act of grace, as many of his contemporaries might wish to do. His view that in this life evils outweigh goods, endorsed by Epicurean concerns over the problem of evil, and by physiological arguments about the ultimate prevalence of pain and suffering over peace and pleasure in all sensate beings, press him toward the gnostic conclusion that creation is a tragedy or mistake. Stopping short of such condemnation, al-Rāzī treats creation as a qualified evil: Life as a whole and bodily existence in general represent a fall for the life-giving principle, the Soul. But the fall is broken by the gift of intelligence. The crypt of the gnostic image has a skylight, through which streams the light of day. There is an avenue of escape. And the Soul's fall, neither devised nor forced by God, is ascribed to her spontaneity, not to God's will or wisdom. It was neither coerced and destined nor mandated by the very nature of intelligence, as though it were (as in Neoplatonism) a demand of logic, but it was foreseen and tolerated by an all-seeing wisdom. And the loss it brought about will be overcome.

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