

HARVARD MIDDLE EASTERN MONOGRAPHS

*The Political Aspects of  
Islamic Philosophy*

Essays in Honor of  
Muhsin S. Mahdi

CHARLES E. BUTTERWORTH  
Editor



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XXVII

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resigned acceptance of the world around him point to these larger questions. It is not as a proto-Mu'tazilite thinker that al-Kindī is to be understood, but as someone intent on balancing the claims of pagan Greek philosophers and faithful followers of a new, apparently more readily accessible, wisdom. Alert to the wisdom and examples of human excellence set forth in the writings of the Greeks as well as in the revelation accorded such respect in his own community, al-Kindī has the merit of discerning how the two complement one another with respect to individual well-being. And in dwelling so thoroughly on these questions of individual excellence, he points clearly to the broader issue even while failing to address it directly himself.

• T W O •

*The Political Implications  
of al-Rāzī's Philosophy\**

Paul E. Walker

AL-RĀZĪ'S LIFE  
AND PHILOSOPHICAL WRITINGS

Al-Rāzī<sup>1</sup> was, according to one eye-witness report,<sup>2</sup> a remarkable figure, large of head, given to presiding at assemblies of

\* Several colleagues have rendered assistance in writing this paper. Among them I would particularly like to credit Wael Hallaq and Charles Butterworth.

1. Al-Rāzī's philosophical writings have been the subject of a number of studies. Among the more recent are those by Mehdi Mohaghegh, whose several works were ultimately formed into a book with the title *Fīlsūf-i-Rayy: Muḥammad Ibn-i-Zakariyyā-i-Rāzī* (Teheran: Anjuman Athār Milli, 1974); and Lenn Evan Goodman, in the following three articles: "Rāzī's Psychology," *Philosophical Forum* 4 (1972): 26–48; "The Epicurean Ethic of Muḥammad ibn Zakariyā ar-Rāzī," *Studia Islamica* 34 (1971): 5–26; and "Rāzī's Myth of the Fall of the Soul: Its Function in His Philosophy," in *Essays on Islamic Philosophy and Science*, ed. George F. Hourani (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), 25–40. The basic work, however, was done mostly in the 1930s by Paul Kraus and Shlomo Pines. For Pines, see *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre* (Berlin, 1936); "Rāzī critique de Galien," in *Actes du VIIe Congrès International d'Histoire des Sciences* (Paris: Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences, 1953), 480–487;



his students, surrounded by ranks of them organized in concentric, descending status. Those seeking his advice would first petition the outermost circle with the details of the particular problem troubling them. If no adequate answer was given at that level, the question would be passed forward until, ultimately, it reached the master himself. Yet, despite his lofty position, the man at the center of all this attention and devotion, famous for his unparalleled knowledge of medicine and medical practice, was said to be generous, gracious, devoted to ordinary people, and of such compassion for the poor and ill that he himself provided them ample rations and sick care. At the same time, he enjoyed the confidence of the rich and powerful, often attending the kings and princes of his day as physician and advisor. He was placed in charge of major hospitals on at least

- "Some Problems of Islamic Philosophy," *Islamic Culture*, 11 (1937): 66–80; and "Appendice IV: Notes sur Abū Bakr al-Rāzī," in *Nouvelles Etudes sur Awḥad al-Zamān Abū-l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī* (Paris: Durlacher, 1955), 55–61. The most remarkable achievements of any, of course, are the publications of Kraus. He edited al-Bīrūnī's "Treatise on the Works of al-Rāzī," i.e., *Risālah li-al-Bīrūnī fī Fihrist Kutub Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā al-Rāzī* (Paris: Imprimerie Orientaliste Auclame, 1936). Moreover, he edited and translated much of the basic al-Rāzī related material in *Orientalia*. See "Raziana I," *Orientalia*, NS 4 (1935): 300–334; "Raziana II," *Orientalia*, NS 5 (1936): 35–56, 358–378. He then published most of these works in a volume entitled *Rasā'il Falsafiyyah* (Cairo: Imprimerie Paul Barbey, 1939). The latter was nicely summarized in English by Max Meyerhof in *Islamic Culture* 15 (1941): 45–58. So important is this one volume of material that not having the second, in which Kraus intended to publish other texts by al-Rāzī and additional evidence for them, is a major loss. Among other items, that second volume would have provided a translation of Kraus's own complete analysis of the evidence for al-Rāzī's philosophical writings.
2. Reported thirdhand by Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. G. Flügel (Beirut: Khayats, 1964), 299–302. For an English translation of this report, see B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 701–702.

two occasions: first in his native city, Rayy, and then again at Baghdad, at that time the capital of the Islamic world.

Born in 251/865,<sup>3</sup> this unusual and complex man first undertook a career in literature and for a time music,<sup>4</sup> while also dabbling in philosophy and related matters.<sup>5</sup> At about the age of thirty he moved from Rayy to Baghdad and there began the study of medicine, in which he was to excel.<sup>6</sup> Once his reputation was established, he returned to Rayy. Not long afterwards, he was recalled to the capital during the time of the Abbasid caliph al-Muktafī (289–295/901–907), who seems to have appointed him head of the royal hospital. Following the death of this caliph, he again took up residence in Rayy. Until his death in 313/925 at the age of sixty, he maintained an active medical practice both in that city and elsewhere, attracting numerous students and patients.<sup>7</sup>

3. This is the year given by al-Bīrūnī; see Kraus, ed., *Risālah li-al-Bīrūnī fī Fihrist Kutub Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā al-Rāzī*, 4.
4. According to at least one of the medieval biographical notices on him, he was a lute player. In his biography of al-Rāzī, at any rate, Ibn Khallikān quotes Ibn Juljul to this effect. See Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yan*, ed. Ihsān 'Abbās (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1968), 5:158; English trans. B. de Slane, *Ibn Khallikān's Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1961), 3:312.
5. One area of great concern for him was alchemy, on which he eventually wrote several works, including one attacking al-Kindī for rejecting this subject. There seems to be a certain consistency about al-Rāzī's interest in medicine, in minerals and metals (alchemy), and in physical doctrines.
6. The details of his life, such as the age at which he first went to Baghdad and first began the study of medicine, are not known with certainty. 'Abd al-Rahmān Badawī provides an adequate summary of the various reports in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Karachi: Royal Book Co., 1963), 1:434–436.
7. There is disagreement about the date of his death, although the strongest testimony seems again that of al-Bīrūnī (*Risālah*, 6). Most other dates are later. One important consideration is that al-Kirmānī, an Ismaili antagonist



If al-Rāzī's own and subsequent generations remained in awe of the prodigious extent of his grasp of medicine, there were some who also appreciated his dedication to the investigation of the sciences in general and to philosophy in particular. While he lived, he conducted lively exchanges both in oral debates at the ruler's court in Rayy and in print. Pamphlets once existed containing, for example, details of his rebuttal to the refutation of his work on metaphysics by the great theologian Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī, then the chief of the Baghdad Mu'tazilites.<sup>8</sup> Several times in public sessions at court he faced one of his most vociferous critics, the Ismaili missionary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, and contended with him on issues of great importance and profound sensitivity. Needless to say, his orthodoxy, if there was in fact anything like an orthodoxy at the time and in the places he lived, was clearly jeopardized by his preference for

writing at the beginning of the following century, explicitly says that Abū Ḥātim's well-known debate (the subject of his work *A'lām al-Nubuwwah*, see note 45 below) with al-Rāzī took place in the presence of the Amir Mardāwīj. This is possible only if al-Rāzī's death occurred around 320/932, the date given by Šā'id and repeated by al-Qiftī and Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah; see Ibn Šā'id, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-Umam*, ed. Louis Cheikho (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1912), 33; Ibn al-Qiftī, *Ta'rikh al-Hukamā'*, ed. Julius Lippert (Leipzig, Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903), 271–277; and Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah, *Uyūn al-Anbā'*, ed. A. Müller (Königsberg, 1884), 1:309. There are problems with this, among them that the description of al-Rāzī in Abū Ḥātim's account does not indicate either the blindness or physical infirmity that he himself notes in his autobiographical *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafiyah*. This seems to rule out Mardāwīj, and al-Kirmānī perhaps mistakenly attributed this event to his reign because of the well-known association between Abū Ḥātim and this Amir. See the discussion by S. Stern, *Studies in Early Ismā'ilism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), 202.

8. There is a short notice on him by Albert Nader in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979); see "al-Balkhī, Abū'l-Qāsim." Hereafter, the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed., will be referred to as EI2.

what he thought were the dictates of free, scientific investigation. These, apparently, he neither concealed nor masked by the subterfuge of esoteric expressions.

His was a full and rich career, and it ended naturally after he had reached the pinnacle of success—having by then written over 200 epistles, pamphlets, and books (including some of several volumes). In old age, he suffered from partial physical paralysis and failing eyesight. Nevertheless, he continued with the help of secretaries and scribes to produce.<sup>9</sup> His only major regret, if it should be seen as such, is that, after all he had achieved, some of his detractors would deny him the name philosopher, contending that his public career and hedonistic way of life were at odds with the pursuit of true philosophy.<sup>10</sup> It is a strange complaint, given that the man in question, Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, was to become perhaps the single figure most frequently denounced and disapproved as a heretic in the subsequent history of Islamic thought.

That so many Muslim writers consider the philosophical works of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī heretical is important in the context of a discussion of politics and Islamic thought because few medieval or modern scholars would seriously claim that his ideas and writings represent an Islamic position. The heresy, or rather heresies, of al-Rāzī, however, are complicated in many ways; religious dissent is only one of them. Although demonstrably taken from his own imam<sup>11</sup> and master, Plato, his was

9. This is according to his own testimony. See his *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafiyah*, in *Rasā'il*, 110.

10. Ibid., 99.

11. The Arabic term *imām* has a variety of meanings, but generally suggests "leader," or "master," or, more specifically, "founder of a school." It is the word chosen by al-Rāzī for both Plato and Socrates and certainly indicates his special allegiance to these figures as the ultimate source of his own philosophical thinking.



a philosophy totally at odds with either of the major philosophical trends in the Islamic world, that is, Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism.<sup>12</sup> Any later writer could fault him in an unusually wide variety of ways, religious cynicism being only one of them.

Nevertheless, the issue of his contribution to Islamic thought is important. In the first place, even if there were no other reason for including him, his value as a negative voice against which an "Islamic" political philosophy was to develop must be taken into account. That, however, is an unnecessarily narrow view and a relatively minor element of the argument that follows. Rather, al-Rāzī's evident, open, and public career and the free dispersal of his ideas and writings, at least while he lived, would suggest that the charge against him of Islamic heresy should be partially discounted or at least reexamined in the light of what can be discovered about the motives of those who first raised them. Is it possible that his crucial rejection of prophetic knowledge and miracles, for example, belongs to a debate not now fully discernible because the arguments of only one side survive?<sup>13</sup> In short, what caused Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī,

12. His rejection of Aristotle became almost legendary. Šā'id al-Andalusī says of him that in his work on the divine sciences "he vehemently turned away from Aristotle and faulted him for his disagreement with his master Plato and others among the philosophers who preceded him" (quoted by Kraus, *Rasā'il*, 193).

13. The problem here is not simply the need to take most of the evidence for al-Rāzī's attitudes from refutations of it by his visible opponents, but also the difficulty of recovering the background of many issues and problems of the third-/ninth-century theological debates. Clearly, a number of major figures favored solutions to theological and philosophical problems that subsequently disappeared so completely that it is now almost impossible to reconstruct them. In this respect, al-Rāzī may fall into a category similar to that of Jahm Ibn Šafwān, al-Nazzām, and Ibn al-Rāwandī, to name three different but equally controversial early figures. On Jahm, see the

whose *A'lām al-Nubuwwah* (*Signs of Prophecy*), is the primary source for al-Rāzī's opinions, to take such offense? Why is it that three major accounts of al-Rāzī's religious heresies derive from Ismaili works?<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, there seem to be no simple or neat compartments in which to fit detractors of al-Rāzī. He must surely have been rejected by the widest variety of thinkers possible; so much so, in fact, that his fame, other than for medical knowledge, rests on the quantity of and variety in which his unorthodox opinions are cited for the purpose of refutation in later writings. Some of these need to be considered more seriously than others. Many are, however, rather curious. Why, for example, of all the possible points on which to take issue, did Maimonides in the *Guide of the Perplexed* select al-Rāzī's opinion about the extent

articles "Djahm" and "Djahmiyya" by W. Montgomery Watt in *EI2*; and on Ibn al-Rāwandī, see the article by Paul Kraus and Georges Vajda, also in *EI2*. For al-Nazzām, see the article by H. S. Nyberg in *Brill's First Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1937).

14. I am thinking here also of Ḥamid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī's *al-Aqwāl al-Dhahabiyyah* ed. Šalāḥ al-Šawī, with English intro. by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Teheran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), which is a refutation of al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, and of various passages found in Nāṣir-i Khusraw's several works—particularly his *Jāmi' al-Hikmatayn*, ed. H. Corbin and M. Mo'in (Teheran: Bibliothèque Iranienne, 1953), and his *Zād al-Musāfirīn*, ed. M. Badhl al-Rahmān (Berlin: Kavianī, 1341/1923). Nāṣir-i Khusraw also wrote a specific treatise devoted to refuting al-Rāzī, called *Bustān al-Uqūl*; though this work is mentioned in *Jāmi' al-Hikmatayn*, 137, and *Zād al-Musāfirīn*, 339, probably 103, it seems to be lost. Most of the pertinent material from these sources was collected and utilized by Kraus in his edition of al-Rāzī's *Rasā'il*. See further section 6, "Nāṣir-e Khosraw et Rhazès," of Corbin's "Étude préliminaire" for the edition of the *Jāmi' al-Hikmatayn*, 128–144; also section 6, "Rhazès devant l'ismaélisme," in Corbin's introduction to another Ismaili treatise, *La Qasida ismaélienne d'Abu'l-Haitham Jorjani* (Teheran: Bibliothèque Iranienne, 1955), 64–74.



of evil relative to the good in the world?<sup>15</sup> There was, in general, a tendency to attack him on any number of specific issues, while often using his denial of prophecy as grounds for a general rejection of him in company with a select group of other figures such as Ibn al-Rāwandī and al-Warrāq.<sup>16</sup>

Maimonides evidently makes little of al-Rāzī due to his general assessment of the latter's philosophy. In his famous letter to the Hebrew translator of the *Guide*, Ibn Tibbon, he comments that al-Rāzī's work called *Fī al-'Ilm al-Ilāhī* (*On Divine Science*) is of no value because its author is nothing but a

15. See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pt. 3, chap. 12, 441–442.

16. See, for example, al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Tathbūt Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm 'Uthmān (Beirut: Dār al-'Arabiyyah li-al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 1966), 2:374, which lists al-Rāzī along with al-Ḥaddād, al-Warrāq, Ibn al-Rāwandī, al-Ḥuṣrī, and al-Kindī. On Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq, see the basic biobibliographical material provided by S. M. Stern in *EI2*. Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar Ibn Ziyād al-Ḥaddād and Abū Sa'īd Ibn 'Alī al-Ḥuṣrī are mentioned by Ibn al-Nadīm in the *Fihrist* (see Dodge trans., 418–419; this material is not in the Flügel edition) as Mu'tazilites. 'Abd al-Jabbār identifies them as Shiites, however, mentioning them both several times (2:51, 129, 232, 371, 374), and twice referring only to al-Ḥaddād (2:412, 508). They seem to have denied the signs or miracles of the prophets for some reason and thus—along with al-Rāzī, al-Warrāq, and Ibn al-Rāwandī—warranted 'Abd al-Jabbār's condemnation. Al-Kindī must, in his eyes, have been guilty of similar offenses. On the link between al-Kindī and al-Rāzī, see further, 2:631. Note also that the problem of the *i'jāz* of the Quran—the subject of "Al-Rāzī on Religion and Prophecy" below—is connected specifically to al-Ḥaddād and al-Warrāq at 2:412.

'Abd al-Jabbār's point in the passage on 2:374 is interesting, because it is a reply to a counter argument to the famous challenge about the inimitability of the Quran (see 86–90 and nn. 54–62 below). The counter charge was that Islam so immediately dominated and ruled the areas it touched that no one would dare take up the challenge of imitating its Holy Scripture because of fear. The Qadi's answer to this is that within Islamic society there have, in fact, been a number of figures who wrote books in opposition to prophecy, and these were allowed wide circulation.

physician, that is, he is qualified to speak about that subject and no other.<sup>17</sup> Many writers share Maimonides's judgment, including the Ismaili theologian Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, whose detailed refutation of al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī* (*Book of Spiritual Medicine*) has already been noted. He admits that in corporeal medicine, al-Rāzī is "like a competent rider who gallops alone in the field"; but in spiritual medicine, i.e., psychology and metaphysics, "he is like a proud reporter who relates from others what he does not know himself."<sup>18</sup>

17. Cited and retranslated into Arabic by Kraus, *Rasā'il*, 169 n. 5. This negative judgment by Maimonides becomes all the more significant when it is recalled that he, too, was a physician—but clearly, at least in his own eyes, a physician who was more than a mere physician.

18. See *al-Aqwāl al-Dhahabiyyah*, Arabic text, 2. The English phrases given here are those of Nasr; see his introduction, 2. This characterization was already noted by Kraus; see *Rasā'il*, 10. Another judgment about al-Rāzī by al-Kirmānī (see *ibid.*, 23; al-Ṣawī, 37) says that in medicine for the body his work is like a "green, vigorous branch" and in the care of the soul "like valueless, rotten leather hide."

This sort of opinion about al-Rāzī was common, not merely among the Aristotelians such as Maimonides and al-Kirmānī, but among others of Neoplatonic leanings as well. A good example is Abū al-Ḥasan al-'Āmirī (d. 992), in whose *al-Amad 'alā al-Abad* there is the following interesting passage:

Now Galen, in his time, having composed many works, aspired to be described as wise—that is, to be called "the Sage" instead of "the Physician." But people made fun of him and said, "Go back to your ointments and laxatives, and to treating sores and fevers. For the source of wisdom is too subtle to be found by anyone who has doubts about its informational content. For he who testifies against himself that he is in doubt whether the world is without temporal beginning or created in time, and whether the Hereafter is real or not, and whether the soul is a substance or an accident, occupies too humble a rank to be called a Sage."

The extraordinary thing about the people of our own time is that, when they see that a man has read Euclid's book and mastered the



These criticisms raise the question, however, of whether al-Rāzī's status as the preeminent physician of his time afforded him special protection and was therefore the secret of his apparent freedom from religious persecution. Perhaps his unqualified success and acceptance in this field allowed him to avoid serious direct responsibility for unorthodox beliefs in other areas. It is also possible, of course, that his doctrines were not in his day considered to be as extreme as contemporary opponents like Abū Hātim or as those from later generations would like to have their readers believe.

Unfortunately, much of the available evidence about al-Rāzī must come from just this bewildering hodgepodge of negative citations. His major philosophical works now appear to be lost, and this may have also been the case at a relatively early date. Clearly, for one reason or another, including the most likely one of objectionable content, they were not transmitted. In their absence, a lot must depend on the statements of his opponents

principles of logic, they describe him as a Sage, even if he completely lacks [knowledge of] the divine sciences. Thus they ascribe wisdom to Muhammad b. Zakariyā al-Rāzī because of his proficiency in medicine—this in spite of his various ravings about the five eternal principles and about the corrupt spirits.

Arabic text and English trans. E. Rowson, *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and Its Fate: al-ʿĀmirī's Kitāb al-Amad ʿalā al-ʿĀdā*, American Oriental series, vol. 70 (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1988), 74–75. For details of al-ʿĀmirī's views in this and other parts of the *Amad*, see the extensive commentary on it contained in Rowson's excellent study.

It is curious how closely the complaint of Galen as voiced here resembles al-Rāzī's own as expressed in his *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafīyyah*. Though al-Rāzī rejected parts of Galen's philosophical opinions and even wrote a book of *shukūk* ("doubts") against him, both were eminent physicians wanting to be "sages" as well. Al-Rāzī's *al-Shukūk ʿalā Jālmūs* was discovered by Kraus and was to have been edited by him in volume 2 of the *Rasāʾil*. To date, however, it remains unpublished. On it, see Pines, "Rāzī critique de Galien," *Actes du VIIe Congrès International*, 480–487.

about them, even though it is often impossible to verify that a given author actually had before him the text of al-Rāzī's work rather than some quotations from them in a secondary text. Still, there are a few writings of his that survive and explain his philosophical doctrines in part. These are surely of significantly greater value than the biased accounts of others. Therefore any estimation of his political ideas should derive first from these works, in particular his *Kitāb al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī* and his *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafīyyah* (*Book of the Philosophical Life*). What he offers in these two treatises could be accepted readily as his political philosophy, if in fact they offer any evidence for one. Thereafter, and secondarily, the negative material and its possible indications should be considered.

At this point it should be evident that al-Rāzī, despite having written works that can be used to explain a political teaching, is not a natural subject for this kind of inquiry. He was not a political philosopher, nor was he greatly interested in political matters. Furthermore, if he had written about political theory, there is almost no likelihood he would have allowed a place—that is, a particular place—in it for prophecy or the role of prophets. This is a point requiring additional investigation and further elucidation. What is immediately apparent already in connection with the subject at hand is the irony of al-Rāzī's stated devotion to Plato<sup>19</sup> and yet neglect of, and disinterest in, politics. Al-Rāzī simply does not recognize the Plato of the *Republic* and the *Laws*. His Plato is almost exclusively the author of the *Timaeus*. It is surprising how many of his special

19. His almost exclusive attachment to Plato is apparent in several places and is acknowledged by him in *Kitāb al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī* as well as in the comments recorded by Abū Hātim in his *Aʿlām al-Nubuwwah*. Socrates is the only other philosopher mentioned with approval, and this occurs in the *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafīyyah*. It is reported that al-Rāzī generally defended the older philosophers—that is, those before Aristotle—such as Plato, Pythagoras, Epicurus, and Democritus.



doctrines and ideas can be found in the *Timaeus*. Pines has identified some details that indicate al-Rāzī's affinity to this dialogue and also reveal his lack of appreciation or knowledge of the *Republic*.<sup>20</sup> Another example is his doctrine of pleasure and pain, i.e., that pleasure is the return to a natural state after a serious disruption from it. As Kraus notes, this appears to owe much to the *Timaeus*.<sup>21</sup>

Why did al-Rāzī attach so much importance to, and rely so heavily on, this work, and in what form did he know it? This is an as yet unanswered puzzle, though the most likely sources for al-Rāzī, barring the availability to him of the uncertain integral Arabic translation,<sup>22</sup> are the commentaries by Galen and Plutarch. Al-Rāzī himself is credited with a commentary on the *Timaeus* and a commentary on Plutarch's commentary, although exactly what either one contained or was based on is unknown.<sup>23</sup> But why did he ignore the other writings and interpretations of Plato, particularly as they began to assume a prominent role in Islamic philosophy precisely during his own lifetime? The two currents noteworthy by their absence in his thought are the pronounced metaphysical and theological interpretation of Plato as contained in the Arabic Neoplatonic sources such as the *Theologia*, on the one hand, and the social

20. See Pines, "Appendice IV," *Nouvelles Etudes*, 60–61.

21. Kraus, ed., *Rasā'il*, 139.

22. If such a translation did in fact exist, it might well have contained the introductory material of the dialogue, which sets the scene by giving a brief summary of the main points of the *Republic* (see *Timaeus*, 17a–20c). But there is no particular evidence that al-Rāzī knew of the *Timaeus* in this manner or, equally important, that he had read the *Republic* in any form.

23. Both items, though listed among his works, are now lost. They occur, for example, as entries 107 and 113 in al-Birūnī's catalogue of al-Rāzī's works; see *Risālah li-al-Birūnī*, 15–16.

and political doctrines of Plato that influenced al-Fārābī, on the other.

Having admitted the elusive nature of al-Rāzī's thoughts about political matters and the curious paradox of his failure to take an interest in that side of Plato, we may still be able to infer his attitude to this subject in a general way by extrapolating from what he does say, particularly in the two works mentioned previously, although they are by and large primarily concerned with ethics. Any question of its relationship to Islam or any set religious tradition, however, must be postponed and taken up as a separate problem. It is common for both medieval and modern scholars simply to dismiss al-Rāzī's possible adherence to Islam or the prophet Muhammad out of hand.<sup>24</sup> Therefore it appears necessary, once some notion of his ideas about political and social behavior has been established, to return to this issue. The case against him here has possibly been overstated because it is based on, and therefore shares a peculiar attitude to, his doctrine on prophecy, which has itself not been clearly defined. The task, then, is first to attempt a statement of a political philosophy based on al-Rāzī's own doctrines, but which he himself never offered as such, and, following this, to analyze the actual meaning and context of his purported rejection of Islam. Ultimately it may be possible to look at al-Rāzī in a larger context—one set, and seemingly dominated, by the advent of a true Islamic political philosophy with al-Fārābī. It should always be remembered that al-Rāzī preceded the latter and that his failure to complete his philosophy by offering a place in it for both politics and religion becomes remarkable

24. A typical comment is that of Pines: "He cannot be called a Moslem, being violently opposed to all religions"; see "Translator's Introduction," in Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, cxxx n. 120.



only in the face of al-Fārābī's achievement of precisely this combination.

### THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF AL-RĀZĪ'S ETHICS

#### The Naturalist Foundation

Before attempting to make al-Rāzī confess to a particular political teaching, it is useful to note again that his interest in medicine is a basic component of his thinking.<sup>25</sup> He approaches the world as a physician, even to the point that the obsolete English sense of this term, which denotes an adherent of natural philosophy as a "physicist," applies to him.<sup>26</sup> It is almost as though his philosophy must remain consistent with his medicine and medical theory. For him, the two have not come from different places nor even differing types of investigation. To attempt to extract a philosophy of politics and political life from al-Rāzī is like making the same demand of Plato based entirely on the *Timaeus*. This is, in fact, true in many ways of the entire content of all the parts (if parts is a correct term in this case) of al-Rāzī's philosophy. His ethics, his physics, and his metaphysics share the limited perspective represented by the natural account

25. It is useful to contrast al-Rāzī's attitude to medicine with that of Ibn Sīnā, who also mastered this subject in addition to philosophy. The latter comments in his "Autobiography" that "medicine is not one of the difficult sciences, and therefore I excelled in it in a very short time." This he did apparently by the age of sixteen. See *The Life of Ibn Sina*, ed. and trans. W. E. Gohlman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1974), 24–27. For Ibn Sīnā, medicine is entirely a practical and not a theoretical science and therefore distinctly inferior to physics, mathematics, or metaphysics. Of course, for many, politics is also a practical science.

26. Still, al-Rāzī is not to be counted as a materialist, such an identification being inconsistent with his doctrine of the soul.

of the universe that the character Timaeus offers. It depends on the concept of the world as a "visible animal."<sup>27</sup> The limitations of such a narrow view should be obvious, although its compatibility with the physician's perspective is also easy to discern. Pertinent here is a saying of al-Rāzī, noted by Ibn Khallikān: "When you can cure by a regimen, avoid having recourse to medicine; and when you can effect a cure with a simple medicine, avoid employing a compound one."<sup>28</sup> It would be interesting to speculate on the relationship of the physician's concept of regimen and that of political rule or regime. However, it does not seem possible to make anything of this here because, unlike later writers, al-Rāzī apparently did not develop the political implications of this theme.<sup>29</sup>

More serious is al-Rāzī's doctrine of nature (*tab'* and *tabī'ah*), which lies at the heart of most of his physical and ethical pronouncements. It is remarkable that in his well-known theory of the five eternal, he includes God, soul, time, matter, and space, but not intellect. It is a glaring omission, with the greatest consequences. The absence of mind or reason as a universal and eternal substance, existing independently of the corporeal world, places a corresponding weight on some other principle that gives the created universe its natural order. This cannot be time, matter, or space, all of which are entirely passive and ordered from without. Soul is life, but not necessarily reason, although the human soul is, in part, reasonable and reasoning.

27. This is the point reached by Timaeus, who concludes his discourse by claiming, "The world has received animals, mortal and immortal, and is fulfilled with them, and has become a visible animal containing the visible—the sensible God." *Timaeus* 92c. This translation is from B. Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Random House, 1892).

28. See Ibn Khallikān's biography of al-Rāzī, 5:158 (Arabic text) and 3:312 (English trans.).

29. See, in contrast, al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Millah*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1968), paras. 14c–d.



God, the Creator, although possibly seen by al-Rāzī as immanent rather than transcendent, is not Himself the natural order.<sup>30</sup> He creates nature and individual natures, but is not Nature. However poorly developed, al-Rāzī's concept of nature as the ordering principle of the world is the foundation of his ethics and of his theory of pain and pleasure as well, and surely, of his politics—had he ever expressed it. The proper political order would conform to the rule of nature. Does this imply a concept of natural law? Such a conclusion is surely possible, though to what degree it is supported by the available evidence remains to be seen.

### The Philosophical Life

The first directly discernible political problem raised by al-Rāzī concerns the definition of what he refers to as "the philosophical life."<sup>31</sup> In defense of his own claim to be called *philosopher*, al-Rāzī contends that those who would deny him this title argue that, in contrast to Socrates, whom he has chosen as his imam and model, he does not live ascetically—that is abstemiously avoiding the company of princes, the eating of rich food, the

30. The point here is not entirely clear because it is difficult in the present circumstances to ascertain al-Rāzī's doctrine in any precise way. If he follows Timaeus in this, God—at least God the creator—would be the ordering force and principle in the world. God Himself would constitute the natural order, with deviation from nature being deviation from the divine program.

31. *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafiyyah*, in *Rasā'il*, 98–111. The English version used here is that of A. J. Arberry, which is available in his *Aspects of Islamic Civilization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971), 120–130. Kraus first published this text, with a French translation, as "Raziana I" in *Orientalia*, NS 4 (1935): 300–334. In republishing the text in the *Rasā'il* volume, he made some emendations. Professor Mohaghegh has also given a Persian translation in his book on al-Rāzī.

acquisition of wealth, sexual intercourse, intoxicating drink, amusements, and fine clothing. Al-Rāzī counters this argument by pointing out that, while Socrates once eschewed society and community life, he later accepted it, becoming again the social being that he, al-Rāzī, admits he is. "In fact," he says,

Socrates gave up the more extreme position which he had formerly adopted—and it was that that was truly at fault, tending as it did towards the desolation of the world and the ruin of mankind—when he took to procreating children, fought the enemy, and attended amusements. When a man acts thus, he has ceased to labour for the desolation of the world and the ruin of mankind.<sup>32</sup>

He is unequivocally against ascetic and antisocial practices and at one point even condemns Muslim excesses:

the habit many Muslims have of passing their whole time in mosques, giving up gainful employment, and restricting themselves to a minimum of coarse food and rough, uncomfortable clothing. In all this they do themselves wrong, and inflict pain upon themselves without thereby warding off any correspondingly greater pain.<sup>33</sup>

It is difficult, however, to make much of this, for al-Rāzī's major concern is the violation of the natural mode of human behavior that is implied by giving in to uncontrolled passion or indulging in excess of which extreme asceticism is, for him, one example. Likewise, there are extremes of commission as well as omission. There is a

certain limit which cannot be transgressed. All men must refrain from such pleasures as may not be gratified without perpetrating

32. *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafiyyah*, 100–101; Arberry, 122.

33. *Ibid.*, 106; Arberry, 126.



such injustice or committing murder—in short all such acts as may anger God and are condemned by reason and justice.<sup>34</sup>

On the positive side of al-Rāzī's philosophical attitudes, the closest he comes to a direct involvement with the subject of politics is in his concept of justice ('*adl*') as it is expressed rather vaguely in his two surviving treatises on ethics: *Kitāb al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī* and *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafīyyah*.<sup>35</sup> There is, in general, relatively little in either concerning any concept of social conduct that applies beyond the individual to whole communities other than ethical generalizations that might lead inductively from the particular rule governing each single person to a universal statement. Each person should act justly and treat all others with justice.<sup>36</sup> The extrapolated universal of this is that once all men have become just by having followed the particular rule for each one of them, the whole of human society will be perfectly ordered and in harmony with its true nature. This, however, he does not say and does not appear interested in saying.

34. Ibid., 107; Arberry, 127.

35. I discount the uninformative "Treatise on the Signs of Fortuitous Advancement and Good Fortune" (*Maqālah fī Amārāt al-Iqbāl wa al-Dawlah*) included among al-Rāzī's works edited by Kraus, *Rasā'il*, 135–138. Kraus observes that "the content of this treatise is more diplomatic (*siyāsī*) than philosophic (*falsafī*), and al-Rāzī perhaps composed it with the intent of currying favor with one of the princes of his time" (135).

36. "Since the arbitrament [*ḥukm*] of both reason and justice is against a man inflicting hurt upon another, it follows from this that he may not hurt himself either" (*Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafīyyah*, 105; Arberry, 126). It is worth emphasizing that al-Rāzī writes about individuals and not societies, although presumably the judgment of reason (*ḥukm al-'aql*) rules both. What is glaringly absent from his pronouncements is a discussion of how such "arbitrament" should come to exist in a social context. Obviously the situation that occurs in a transaction between two individuals is different from the interaction of the single man and his conscience. Does the *ḥukm al-'aql* produce law or not?

In fact, it is clear that he cannot accept the universality of this proposition for the reason that it is impossible for all men to obtain, even in theory, any perfection:

to reach the highest summit of this virtue attainable by human nature is scarcely open to any but the supreme philosopher; such a man must be accounted as superior to the common run of humanity, as mankind as a whole excels the beasts.<sup>37</sup>

The unequal worth of individual men is one of al-Rāzī's fundamental ethical axioms.

If two men chance to be in a waterless plain, and one of them has water just sufficient to save his life but not his companion's, in such a case it is right that the water should go to the one who is of greater benefit to his fellows.<sup>38</sup>

Such a person would be "a man of learning and benevolence" or someone "greatly endowed in some manner beneficial to the whole of mankind."

Another approach to al-Rāzī's purpose in these matters is to consider his general statement of the fundamental principles of the philosophical life. They are explained in detail in his books, he says, and he then lists the ones he apparently considers the most important. They are as follows: *On Divine Science*, *The Spiritual Medicine*, *In Reproof of Those Would-Be Philosophers Who Occupy Themselves with Geometrical Curiosities*, and *On the Nobleness of the Art of Chemistry*. Of these, the second is, by his own admission, especially important.<sup>39</sup> The list is curious,

37. *Kitāb al-Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*, in Kraus, ed., *Rasā'il*, 21; Arberry, 23.

38. *Kitāb al-Sīrah al-Falsafīyyah*, 104; Arberry, 125.

39. Ibid., 101; Arberry, 122.



however, and the reason that he sees these as the foundation of his philosophy is not readily apparent—above all, since only one survives.

In the *Philosophical Life*, he states the six fundamental roots (*uṣūl*) on which the rest of his approach depends. They are as follows:<sup>40</sup>

After death we shall find ourselves in a state that is either admirable or reprehensible according to the life we have lived whilst our souls were associated with our bodies.

The supreme end for which we were created and towards which we have been led is not the gratification of physical pleasures, but the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of justice. These two occupations are our sole deliverance out of the present world into the world wherein is neither death nor pain.

Nature and passion prompt us to prefer present pleasure; but reason frequently urges us to eschew present pleasures for the sake of other objects which it prefers.

Our Ruler, for Whose reward we hope (whilst fearing His punishment), is watching over us with compassion, and does not desire that we should suffer pain. It is hateful to Him that we should be unjust and ignorant; He loves us to have knowledge and to be just. This same Ruler will punish those of us who inflict pain, and those who deserve to be pained, each according to his deserts.

We must not suffer pain alongside any pleasure, when that pain exceeds the pleasure both in quantity and in quality.

The Almighty Creator has entrusted to us all the particular things that we need, such as husbandry, spinning and the like, upon which the world itself and our own livelihood alike depend.

40. Ibid., 101–102; Arberry, 123.

Most noteworthy is the second of these, that the supreme end of man is "the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of justice." For al-Rāzī, this alone provides deliverance, i.e., salvation. If only he had been specific about what he means by justice and how it functions alongside knowledge. In the absence of any further discussion of this subject, it appears that *justice* in his philosophy is merely a general term for the scale by which he measures all voluntary acts according to his general theory of ethics.

True virtue consists in taking of every need so much as is indispensable, or so much as will not involve pain exceeding the pleasure thereby procured.<sup>41</sup>

This, for al-Rāzī, seems to be justice, but the political component of what it might suggest is missing from his philosophy. He did not carry these principles into further thoughts about the implications they might have for communities. Apparently, al-Rāzī took no interest in the city or the nation as distinct theoretical entities. In this sense, he was clearly nonpolitical; and it is possible that there were, for him, serious reasons why this should be so. To examine how this could be, it is necessary to introduce and analyze, in what follows, his attitude toward religions and prophets.

If the concept of city and civic did enter his thinking, it was quite likely subsumed within the more general category of nation, that is, religious community, as expressed in the Arabic and Quranic notion of *ummah* and *millah*. A nation is the body of constituents of a particular religious leader or prophet. If these constitute destructive divisions of mankind, as al-Rāzī seems to have thought, it is clear that, in his way of thinking—

41. Ibid., 100; Arberry, 122. The translation here is that of Arberry, who has compressed al-Rāzī's phrase *al-amr al-aḥḍal al-ashraf* ("the best and most noble conduct") into simply "true virtue."



as reinforced by his theory of nature—the individual is the primary seat of justice. The true philosopher, who acts only in “imitation of Almighty God so far as lies within man’s power,”<sup>42</sup> is the highest example of justice, not because he governs a virtuous city or participates in causing society to seek social justice and collective deliverance, but merely because he exemplifies this virtue within himself.

#### AL-RĀZĪ ON RELIGION AND PROPHECY

At some point in his career, al-Rāzī wrote a major work, *On Divine Science*, which appears to have disappeared long ago, perhaps even in the century following his death. Nevertheless, while it was available or even while its contents were still known, it was widely refuted and generally rejected. This obviously began to happen prior to al-Rāzī’s death, implying both that the treatise in question circulated freely and that he completed it sometime prior to the last phase of his life.<sup>43</sup> The subjects covered in it are of considerable interest, particularly as the question of how it relates to other titles in the common list of his books is quite uncertain. Kraus suspected that many of the other items, such as those that purport to discuss the five eternals, either together or individually, and pleasure and pain,

42. Ibid., 108: “inna al-falsafah hiya al-tashabbuh bi allāh, ‘azz wa jall, bi-qadr mā fī ṭāqat al-insān.” It is noteworthy that this part of the standard definition of *philosophy* was so completely taken to heart by al-Rāzī.

43. Note, for example, a work by al-Rāzī, cited by Ibn al-Nadīm (*Fihrist*, 300) and entitled “The Reply to Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī Concerning his Refutation of the Second Section of *On Divine Science*.” Other notes and citations that confirm the existence of such a work are given by Kraus in *Rasā’il*, 167–168. The English version of Ibn al-Nadīm by Dodge is not clear on this point.

and possibly prophecy as well, are actually sections (*maqālāt*) of this same work.<sup>44</sup> Whether this is the case or not, *On Divine Science* must have discussed, either in summary or in detail, most of al-Rāzī’s philosophical ideas, including his notions about prophets and religions.

The best, and most complete, available evidence concerning what he said in this work appears in an apparently specific refutation of it by the Ismaili missionary, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī. His treatise, called *Signs of Prophecy*,<sup>45</sup> indicates by its title that it belongs to a special genre of Islamic literature that seeks to affirm the prophecy of Muhammad and to prove that he is one in, and the last of, a line of prophets stretching from Noah (and Adam?)<sup>46</sup> to the advent of Islam. The type of argumentation used in this literature first arose in the world of Islam as a reaction to the Jewish<sup>47</sup> rejection of Muhammad’s claim to be a true prophet. Consequently, for Muslim writers, the comparison between those signs (*a’lām*) that testify to Muhammad’s

44. See the comments by Kraus in his introduction to the fragments from this work presented in *Rasā’il*, 165–170. He also gives there an extensive list of those medieval authors who either cite the work by name or quote from it.

45. Kraus used Abū Ḥātim’s work and extracted from it much of the material directly pertinent to al-Rāzī. This was published by him in *Rasā’il*, 291–316, and in “Raziana II.” The full text of the *A’lām al-Nubuwwah* was subsequently edited by Ṣalāḥ al-Ṣawī and Gholēm-Rezā A’vānī (Teheran: Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977).

46. The question of whether Adam was a prophet in this sense is complicated, and not all authors—especially Ismaili authors—agree.

47. The Christian claim of divinity for Jesus did not, however, elicit the same reaction on the part of Muslims: for them, Jesus is simply a prophet; but for Christians, he is God and therefore not a prophet. There is thus no reason for Muslims to compare their concept of Muhammad’s prophecy with what is for them a totally unacceptable Christian doctrine concerning Jesus. See Sarah Stroumsa, “The Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature,” *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985): 101–114.



prophecy and those that verify the older prophets must be equally valid—and, it should be added, equally miraculous. The historicity of the prophets and of their divine role in the unfolding of human civilization is axiomatic.

It was the denial of this fundamental principle that constituted the gravest threat to Abū Ḥātim's doctrines, not the mere rejection of some particulars of it. Although he would have liked to castigate al-Rāzī, other *mulḥidūn*, and the *Barāhimah*<sup>48</sup> by simply demonstrating their heresy concerning Muhammad and his one, presumably universally accepted—universally accepted, that is, by Muslims—miracle, Abū Ḥātim's position involves much more. It necessitates an affirmation of all apostolic miracles.

As an Ismaili, Abū Ḥātim of course has an even greater interest in the historical authenticity of the prophetic tradition. As a Shi'ite, he subscribes not only to a theory of law-giving prophets—called speaking-prophets (*nuṭaqā'*) by the Ismailis—who have periodically revived and renewed God's religion, but to a series of divinely appointed *imāms*, as well, who unerringly lead their followers on God's path in the interregnum between such law-givers.

His *Signs of Prophecy*, however, is not particularly Shi'ite in character. It is polemical in tone, not to support a specifically Ismaili position,<sup>49</sup> but to refute all those who deny the signs

48. Abū Ḥātim frequently reverts to the plural *al-mulḥidūn*, thereby indicating, it would seem, that al-Rāzī was not alone. In fact, the opposition to Abū Ḥātim's view of prophecy clearly included such ill-defined groups as the so-called *Barāhimah*, whose very existence as a group was shaped by a doctrine rejecting the historicity of prophecy. On the *Barāhimah*, see Sarah Stroumsa, "The *Barahima* in Early Kalam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 6 (1985): 229–241.

49. It must be observed that Abū Ḥātim does not speak in this work as the ardent Shi'ite he presumably was, to say nothing of his Ismaili loyalties

and indications of the prophets in a general way. Specific among these is al-Rāzī and, in particular, or so it would seem, his book *On Divine Science*.<sup>50</sup> Assuming that the statements and ideas attributed to al-Rāzī<sup>51</sup> in Abū Ḥātim's refutation were drawn from *On Divine Science*, a good deal can be learned about the contents and arguments of this work.

Al-Bīrūnī gives the titles of two treatises by al-Rāzī that he labeled heretical (*al-kufriyyāt*), both of which are usually accepted as indicative of his strident antireligious tendencies. One is *Fī al-Nubuwwāt* (*On Prophethoods*) and the other is *Fī Ḥiyāl al-Mutanabbiyyīn* (*On the Tricks of Pretenders to Prophethood*)—the first, according to al-Bīrūnī, being, more properly, "a refutation of religions" and the second "on the hoaxes of

and points of view. As far as the general argument of this book is concerned, its author need not have been either Ismaili or even Shi'ite. A sense of the historical position and value of the prophets in cyclical terms nevertheless appears in it, although in a muted way. This "history" must be understood to lie behind his great concern to destroy al-Rāzī's position. On the importance of the historical imperative in Ismaili thought, see P. Walker, "Eternal Cosmos and the Womb of History," *IJMES* 9 (1978): 355–366.

50. In the surviving manuscripts of Abū Ḥātim's work, the introduction is missing. Where they do begin it is stated that, although some portions of the debate between al-Rāzī and himself took place on several occasions at court, the general nature and tone of what he describes conform to what al-Rāzī set forth in his book "which we have already mentioned"; see al-Ṣāwī and A'vānī, eds., *A'lām al-Nubuwwah*, 3.

51. Unfortunately, Abū Ḥātim constantly refers to him by the appellation "the heretic" (*al-mulḥid*) and does not give his name, at least not in the portion of the *A'lām* that survives. The identification is certain, however, and confirmed by the fact that Abū Ḥātim's "heretic" is well known for his doctrine of the five eternalists and his devotion to Plato. Abū Ḥātim's "heretic" admits, for example, that his theory of time and of place is that of Plato and accuses Abū Ḥātim of holding Aristotle's view of both (16, 19).



the prophets.”<sup>52</sup> Whether these titles actually reflect separate treatises or are sections of his *On Divine Science* is difficult to say. Be that as it may, the same or quite similar arguments must almost certainly have existed in the latter. Abū Ḥātim makes it abundantly clear that al-Rāzī said a substantial amount on the subject of prophetic miracles, probably in the form of a specific chapter: “On the subject of miracles (*al-muʿjizāt*), the heretic composed a substantial discourse (*qawlan kathīran*), which he organized in the form of questions and answers.”<sup>53</sup> This is presumably a discourse within the same book mentioned earlier by Abū Ḥātim, which also included details of al-Rāzī’s metaphysical and physical philosophy.

Now that it is evident that Abū Ḥātim’s intent is to affirm the common miracles, not only of Muhammad but also of previous prophets, al-Rāzī’s position must obviously, in some way or another, be the opposite. Moreover, Abū Ḥātim claims that all human knowledge of any kind, insofar as it is new in the history of mankind, must be the result of direct, divine inspiration (*ilhām*). God alone provides knowledge of what benefits and what harms. What is known of the sciences—mathematics, astronomy, or medicine—comes only through His chosen messengers. Since this seems to be a key issue, it is well to analyze it prior to investigating how Abū Ḥātim’s account reflects the whole of al-Rāzī’s work. This is particularly important for the subject of prophetic miracles.

The first thing to note is that this subject involves the plural: not a miracle but miracles, just as it is not a prophet but prophets. Abū Ḥātim’s concern is obvious. Muhammad’s ability to perform miracles must be equal to and greater than that of all previous prophets. For him, it is not merely a matter of the inimitability of the Quran, although al-Rāzī denies even this

52. See al-Bīrūnī, *Risālah*, 20.

53. Abū Ḥātim, in al-Ṣāwī and Aʿvānī, eds., *Aʿlām al-Nubuwwah*, 191

miracle as being self-evident. There are, for Abū Ḥātim, many, many other signs of Muhammad’s apostleship.<sup>54</sup>

What exactly was al-Rāzī’s position? Certainly he rejected the historical necessity of the prophetic mission and of the so-called signs or miracles that affirm it. If recognition and literal acceptance of prophetic miracles, including many performed by Muhammad himself, were necessary for being counted a Muslim, al-Rāzī would have demurred. However, in the period during which he wrote *On Divine Science*, the doctrine of prophetic miracles—and even the specifics of the miracle of the Quran—was not yet fixed. Abū Ḥātim thinks its incomparability is self-evident, quoting several times the challenge: “Whoever would deny it, let him bring forth its like.”<sup>55</sup> To this al-Rāzī apparently retorts, “We will bring you a thousand like it”:

If you meant something like it according to the aspects by which one discourse is superior to another, we should produce for you from the words of the eloquent, the literary, and those skilled in rhyme and poetry, a thousand like it, more articulate than it in terms of phrasing, more succinct in signification, graver in rendering and expression, and more elaborate in rhyme. If these do not meet your approval, then we would demand of you an example of what you want.<sup>56</sup>

54. Abū Ḥātim says (*ibid.*, 227): “We have mentioned some of the proofs (*dalāʾil*) of Muhammad, as we set out to do, but not all because they are extremely numerous.”

55. See 191–192; with reference to the Quran, 2:23, he also says, “As Muhammad challenged the Arabs to bring forth a surah to match any of it, and they were unable to do so.” Or again, 229, drawing from the Quran, 18:88: “If mankind and the *jinn* were to gather together to produce the like of the Quran, they could not produce the like thereof—even if they backed each other with help and support.”

56. Abū Ḥātim sees clearly the problem posed by al-Rāzī. In demanding an example of what constitutes a “likeness,” al-Rāzī, according to Abū Ḥātim, is effectively asking him to produce the moon or stars—and this is something only God can do.



Then he continues,

By God, if it is necessary that a book be the evidence [*hujjah*],<sup>57</sup> the books on the principles of geometry or the *Almagest*, which leads to the understanding of the motions of the heaven and the planets, or similar books on logic, and the books on medicine, in which there is the science of the care of bodies, are better as evidence than something which yields neither benefit nor harm and does not reveal anything concealed.

Here Abū Ḥātim inserts parenthetically "he means by this the magnificent Quran" and continues quoting:

Anyone can compose tales offering no information or demonstrative proof that nevertheless claim to be evidence [for prophecy].<sup>58</sup> If an opponent wishes to make a claim of this sort, we would concede it to him and leave him to that state the intoxication of foolishness and caprice has induced in him, even though we can produce for him something better in the way of first-rate poetry or eloquent speech and marvelous epistles—and this such that it is more eloquent, more articulate, and of finer rhyme than it [the Quran]. In the true sense, these are what signify the superiority of a discourse. As for the excellence of such discourse<sup>59</sup>

57. Al-Rāzī's use of this term is interesting. What exactly does he mean by *hujjah*? Is it a "proof" or, as translated here, "evidence"? It should be remembered that *hujjah*, among the Shī'ah, is a technical term denoting God's "proof" on earth, i.e., the imam. A proof in this sense is the equivalent of Abū Ḥātim's *dalīl* or *'alam*. In either case, the meaning seems to point to what establishes God's involvement in human affairs at a particular time and place.
58. Al-Rāzī's point is that any body of writing can be unique simply by virtue of the fact that it lacks logical coherence. Without a "logic"—that is, a formal structure—it does not fall under either the rules of comparison or those of duplication.
59. *Kalām* here seems to mean those words or discourses he would offer as comparable to the Quran and that he would produce from among the writings of poets and philosophers.

over the Book, this is because of the multitude of matters [in it] having numerous benefits. There is in the Quran nothing of that superiority which occurs in such discourse, since the Quran is devoid of these qualities we have just mentioned.<sup>60</sup>

At first glance, the argument of al-Rāzī appears to be self-evidently heretical and to imply an outright rejection of the sacred nature of the Quran. This is, of course, what Abū Ḥātim intends the reader to think. The exchange is, however, more complex than that. Al-Rāzī is saying that those who hold the miraculous quality of the Quran to be proof of Muhammad's prophecy and claim this miracle to lie in the inability of anyone to produce its like are, in fact, arguing a tautology. The Quran is incomparable because it can be compared only to its own likeness. In other words, it can be compared only to itself. Since it is unique, to demand such a comparison is not as impossible as it is absurd. Abū Ḥātim's "proof" is not a proof.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, the ways in which al-Rāzī goes about questioning the foundation of apostolic miracles in general looks remarkably similar, and probably belongs, to the attitude of a number of Mu'tazilite theologians of the third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries beginning with al-Nazzām. They, too, reject the notion that the Quran *cannot* be imitated, holding instead the doctrine of *ṣarfah* in which God is said to have prevented the Arabs and

60. Ibid., 228–229.

61. This, when all is said and done, is the crux of the debate between the two al-Rāzīs. Abū Ḥātim would like to prove his contentions; yet in making the attempt, he reveals a position weaker than his opponent's. Abū Bakr, on the other hand, at least on the question of prophecy, is never allowed to express any attitude toward revealed religion that is positive in any manner whatsoever. Is that the actual extent of his willingness to recognize religion—that is, to reject all forms of revelation? Or is there another position he might have taken short of such an extreme?



others from imitating it, although they would have had this ability had He not intervened.<sup>62</sup>

A second area of discussion that provides another good example of al-Rāzī's way of dealing with the issue of prophecy and religions is his claim that God's favoring one particular individual with prophecy to the exclusion of other men and the slavish following of the doctrine set forth by such a man makes for the beginning of dissension, mutual antagonism, and communal strife. Their cause is the particularistic nature of these "revelations," which fosters the adherence of some men but not others and results in the opposition of contending religions.<sup>63</sup>

62. There is relatively little written about this particular Mu'tazilite doctrine or even the development and history of their concepts of *i'jāz al-Qur'ān*. However, the evidence suggests that the exact meaning and application of this notion changed over the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries so as to become less and less open to the sorts of questions that caused al-Nazzām (and, later, mainly the Baghdad Mu'tazilites) to restrict sharply the dimensions of the miracle in question. See the interesting discussion of this by Richard Martin, "A Mu'tazilite Treatise on Prophethood and Miracles," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1975, 20–101.

What may well separate al-Rāzī from the Mu'tazilites, however, is the question of content. They seem to have held that the miracle of the Quran lies in its content, not its form. Al-Rāzī seems to find the ancient classics of scientific and philosophical scholarship of greater benefit to mankind than the Quran, but it is not clear on exactly what terms. Does this mean, therefore, that he rejected the sacred scripture of Islam altogether? I am not sure that conclusion is self-evident, given the particular biases of the witness in question, i.e., Abū Ḥātim.

63. Ironically, this is the Ismaili position as well. See, for example, Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's *Kitāb al-Yanābir*, ed. Henry Corbin, in *Trilogie ismaélienne* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1961), 14, where he indicates that the outward (*ẓāhir*) revelation or sacred law (*sharī'ah*), being fixed as it is in time and place, gives rise to exactly those kinds of blind, slavish partisanships al-Rāzī describes. Al-Sijistānī admits that disagreement and dissension result from adherence to the outward, literary form of a holy law. Presumably, Abū Ḥātim would have also admitted this, and it is, in part, implied

To counter this, al-Rāzī urges that, rather than God singling out some men as having a special, superior quality over others, all men are equal by nature. God has endowed them equally. It is only in their application to matters of learning and investigation in particular subjects that they are unequal. Were all men to concentrate their efforts in the same area of investigation, they would, according to him, all presumably achieve a similar degree of mastery.<sup>64</sup> For him, the nature (*ṭab'*) of all humans is the same, and the act of learning is basic to that nature. Of course, not everyone learns the same things. Different people thus acquire different levels of proficiency. As a result, they come to have a certain kind of inequality with respect to other individuals within a given society. However, according to this line of thought, men as a species learn what they need to know just as ducks learn to swim. There are no prophets whose natures are different from those of other men. Consequently, the messages they claim to convey do not belong to a special category of knowledge.<sup>65</sup> In short, it is not necessary for men

in his answer to al-Rāzī: He argues that, outwardly, there does exist substantial "disagreement" among the various holy laws, but not in their true (inner) meanings, which are in agreement and harmony.

64. See particularly the statement Abū Ḥātim offers in Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's name: "If he [i.e., a person who has mastered a form of knowledge other than philosophy] had expended his efforts on what I have expended mine on and investigated what I have, he would have come to comprehend what I do"; al-Ṣāwī and A'vānī, eds., *A'lām, al-Nubuwwah*, 4–5.

65. See the interesting "exchange" between the two al-Rāzīs beginning on page 282 of the *A'lām al-Nubuwwah*, ed. al-Ṣāwī and A'vānī.

There is a curious hole here in Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's argument. If all humans are alike in their natures, what causes the unequal application of some to the learning of science as opposed to others? Presumably, motivation is one element in the nature of man.

Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's main goal here seems, as much as anything, to be to prove that man achieves some portion of his learning without the aid of divinely inspired prophets. As a consequence, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī could



to follow such religious figures blindly and obediently or to learn uncritically from a set of divinely ordained imams or master teachers who claim unique authority. Nor is the knowledge previously available to humankind superior in any essential way to what may be adduced through human investigations in the future.

### CONCLUSION

This may suffice for the present purposes, since a detailed exposition of the conflict between the two al-Rāzīs requires a full analysis of these issues in the context of, first, Abū Ḥātim's peculiarly Ismaili beliefs<sup>66</sup> and, second, the complete back-

not maintain, as he would like to, that all human knowledge derives from such a source. Learning is a part of the nature of mankind; the extent of it can vary according to the individual capacities of particular men.

Abū Ḥātim, on the other hand, finds Abū Bakr's argument particularly ludicrous at this point. A duck, he maintains, learns to swim precisely because it is in the nature of ducks to swim; there are no ducks that do not swim, but "there are humans who are incapable of learning even a single letter" (ibid., 284).

66. An example of these is the Ismaili doctrine of *tafāwut* or "disparity," that is, of the relative virtue and excellence among individuals within a single species. Not only are all beings ranked according to species in hierarchies that result from such disparities, but humans produce some who rise so far above the rest that they assume a higher cosmic rank based on their ability to receive divine inspiration. They are "strengthened by the holy spirit" (*mu'ayyad bi-rūḥ al-quds*) and can therefore no longer be classed as human—at least not in the ordinary sense of that term. Since the order of the cosmos depends on such natural and innate structuring, it follows that human society, too, can find its proper organization only by recognizing and following the divinely ordained hierarchy within it. On this, see section 1 of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's *Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt*, ed. A. Tamir (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1966), 13–48; and P. Walker, "Cosmic Hierarchies in Early Ismaili Thought: The View of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī," *The Muslim World* 66 (1976): 14–28.

ground of the possible position of al-Rāzī.<sup>67</sup> Much, if not most, of such an investigation is beyond the scope of this inquiry, since it transcends the limitation of what constitutes politics. Here, however, some preliminary conclusions seem readily apparent.

Abū Ḥātim stresses both the historical necessity of prophecy and its continuous function. This position requires that whatever was genuinely valuable in the knowledge of ancient Greek thinkers must have derived from the prophets. Idris, or Enoch of the Book tradition, was known to the philosophers under the name Hermes.<sup>68</sup> The continuation of the prophetic function lies, for him, in the imamate, although this is a subject he does not take up in his discussion with al-Rāzī, even though it is essential to at least one aspect of his doctrine—the perpetual need of mankind for a divine source of knowledge that solves new problems as they arise in the periods following the death of the prophet.

In contrast, the attitude of al-Rāzī is one that rejects the historicity of the prophets. He seems to see no reason why Moses should be superior to Plato, Jesus to Galen, or, more important, perhaps, why contemporary human beings may not improve on any of their predecessors.

67. It must be stressed again that Abū Ḥātim reveals much more about himself in his account than he does about al-Rāzī. It is all too easy to accept his ridicule and refutation of an opponent who speaks to us only distantly and in words selected by him. Nevertheless, Abū Ḥātim's *A'lām al-Nubuwwah* is a fascinating document both for what it says about al-Rāzī and for the evidence it provides for the attitude of a religious scholar concerning the value of theoretical philosophy in a roughly contemporary period (Abū Ḥātim died most likely in 322/934).
68. See, for example, al-Ṣāwī and A'vānī, eds., *A'lām al-Nubuwwah*, 257, where Abū Ḥātim specifically recognizes the *Almagest* and books of Euclid and Ptolemy as containing valid wisdom (*ḥikmah*) because of God's *ta'yīd*. He insists, nonetheless, that they are not the equals of the Quran. For the identification of Hermes and Idris, see 278.



But what in all this is al-Rāzī's actual position about the prophet Muhammad and Islam? This is a question that really cannot be answered, certainly not on the mere basis of his refusal to accept the historical argument of Abū Ḥātim. What is clear, on the other hand, is that in his philosophical doctrines, at least such as they are now discernible, there is nowhere a hint that he considered prophets to have a role in forming societies and laws that is not equally accessible to philosophers. If the rational sciences may be discovered by any man who possesses the proper amount of interest in them, and if this is all that humankind requires in order to live properly, God does not need to intervene in human history any more than He does in the historical activities of animals and plants. The idea that social organization has specific causes and that humans are, in part, separated from other types of creatures by both rational and political behavior was not considered by al-Rāzī. He may or may not have accepted that Muhammad was an inspired messenger of divine matters and the provider of an invaluable law for Muslims. It is certain, however, that he found no philosophical doctrine to explain specific, as opposed to general, religion or a particular communal law as distinct from the universal law of nature. In this sense, his creed and *madhhab*, as Abū Ḥātim repeatedly insisted, is philosophy and nothing more.

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*The Theoretical and Practical  
Dimensions of Happiness  
as Portrayed in the  
Political Treatises  
of al-Fārābī*

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Miriam Galston

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INTRODUCTION

Practical philosophy has been variously defined as knowledge that culminates in action, the investigation into what is human or subject to volition and art, and reasoning about contingent beings and events. Although these definitions are referred to in al-Fārābī's works, in his own name or attributed to others, he prefers to characterize practical philosophy in terms of its most significant theme, one implicit in the above definitions:

Practical philosophy is not what investigates everything subject to human control, in whatever manner or condition it occurs. After all, mathematics investigates many things that tend to be the product of voluntary action—for example, the science of music, the sciences of military strategy, and much of the contents of geometry, arithmetic, and the science of optics. Likewise, nat-



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